



**LEGENDS OF  
THE FALL**  
THE WEIRD WORLD  
OF MARK E SMITH

THE DÜRER STAIN BLOODY RAINS AND MIRACULOUS CROSSES  
HIDDEN MEANINGS THE SACRED GEOMETRY OF THE VW POLO  
JERUSALEM SYNDROME GOING NATIVE IN THE HOLY LAND

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BELLA  
IN THE  
WYCHELM?

BLACK MAGIC,  
NAZI SPIES, AND AN  
UNSOLVED WARTIME  
MURDER MYSTERY

YORKSHIRE  
UFO CRASH?

THE RETURN OF THE  
SILPHO MOOR SAUCER

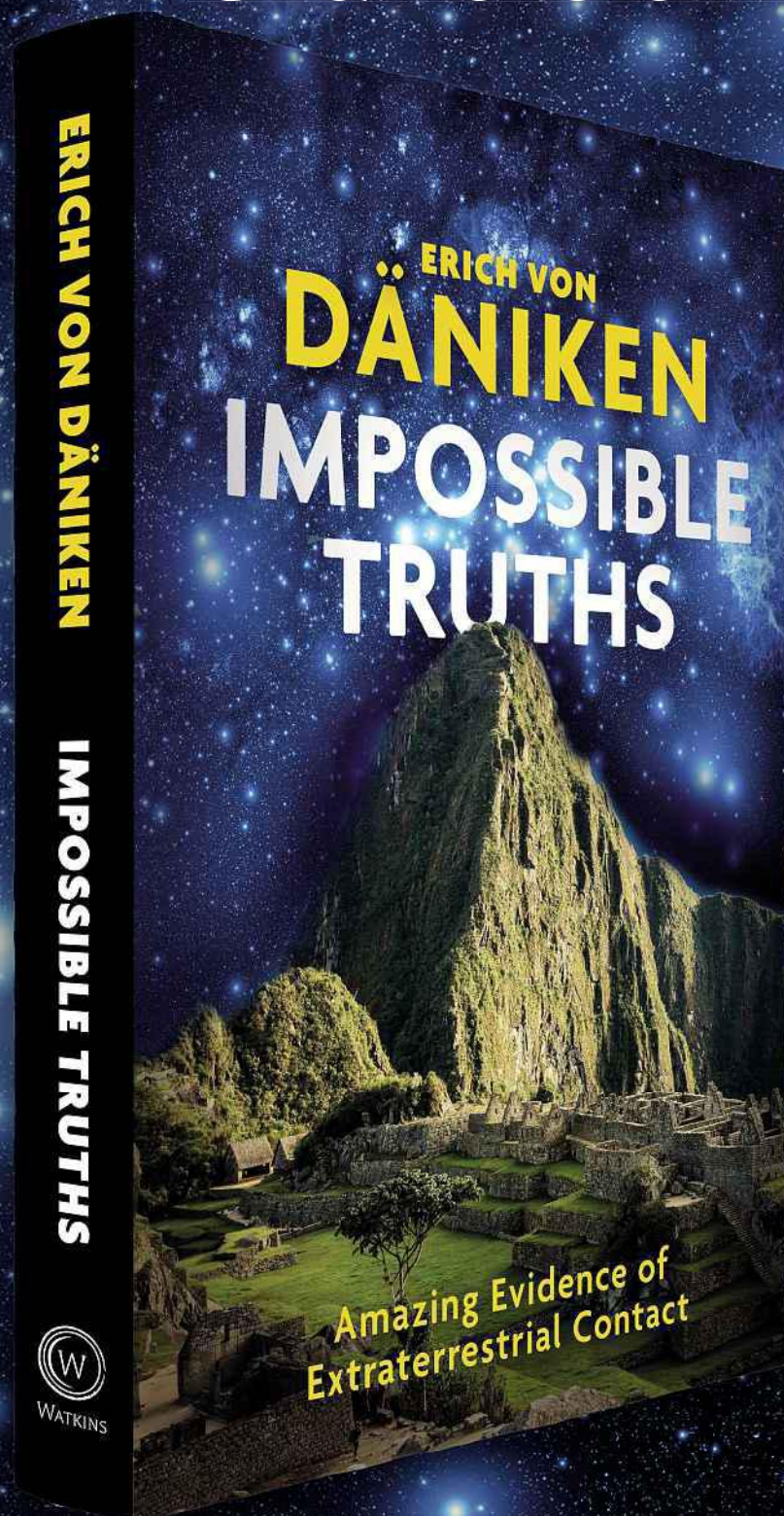
GHOSTLY  
LEGIONS

THE ANCIENT ROMAN  
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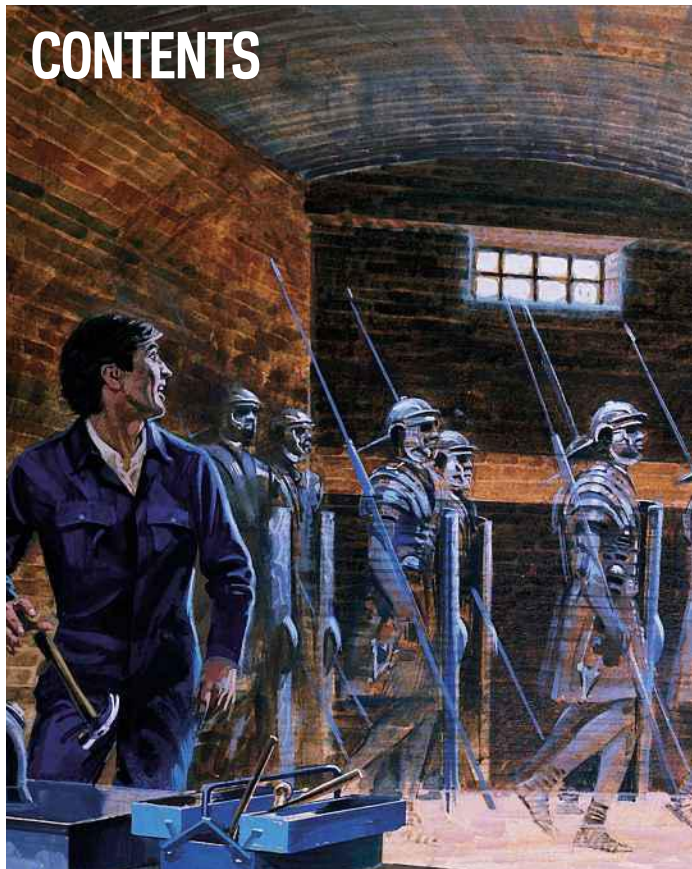


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COVER IMAGE: ETIENNE GILFILLAN  
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WITH THANKS TO CATHI UNSWORTH AND MIKE MEEKIN



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# EDITORIAL



CAPUCINE DESLOUIS

## THAT OLD BLACK MAGIC

### BELLA IN THE WYCH ELM

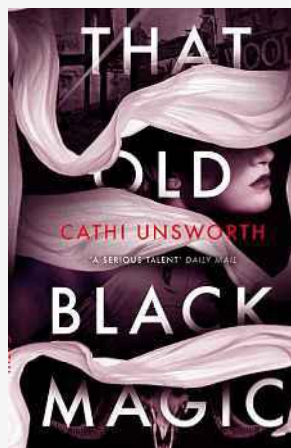
Our cover story this month is a bizarre wartime murder mystery full of tantalising clues and numerous red herrings that remains unsolved to this day.

In April 1943, four teenage boys were on an afternoon poaching expedition in Hagley Woods, part of Lord Cobham's picturesque estate near Stourbridge in the West Midlands, when they stumbled upon something out of a nightmare. The peaceful Clent Hills might not have suffered death raining down from the air, as had nearby bomb-ravaged Birmingham, but they turned out to harbour a fatal secret of their own. In a twisted old wych elm the boys found not the bird's nest they'd hoped for but a human skull, complete with a bit of skin and a hank of red hair still attached to it.

As a story opener, it sounds like something straight out of Stephen King; but, as Cathi Unsworth demonstrates in her feature (pp34-41), this was just the first disturbing event in a mystery that grew with each passing month, throwing up baffling new angles as time went by. The skull was that of a woman whose whole body had been stuffed into the tree after she'd been murdered. But who was she? And why was her right hand missing? And who was the author, or authors, of the enigmatic graffiti messages asking 'Who put Bella in the Wych Elm?' that began to appear on walls and gates around the West Midlands in subsequent months? Was witchcraft or black magic being practised in the Clent Hills? Was a Nazi spy ring involved in the murder? What about the Dutch trapeze artist from the Birmingham Hippodrome? Or the British Officer who had allegedly died insane in a nearby asylum?

Truth, as they say, is often stranger than fiction; but the enduring mysteries of the Hagley Woods murder have recently inspired both a new film (see p38) and a period crime novel by Cathi Unsworth herself. We have no doubt that forteneans will enjoy Cathi's transformation of the case into a novel, especially one that makes such ingenious use of various

strands of wartime forteneana to link the Bella murder with Harry Price, the Ghost Club, Hannen Swaffer and the prosecution of medium Helen Duncan, the last person to be prosecuted under the Witchcraft Act of 1735; not to mention Royston Caves, the Knights Templar and the goat-headed god Baphomet – but more on him next issue...



### WATER WITCHCRAFT

The UK's water companies have to field an unusual public relations embarrassment recently when it was revealed that a good many of their engineers, when searching for leaking pipes and burst water mains, have recourse to that centuries-old but not scientifically approved technique involving divining rods (see p4). One scientist dismissed such dowsing as "witchcraft". Despite

having attracted the ire of such sceptics, one water company, we learn, has now been experimenting with another unconventional method for detecting leaks: employing a water-sniffing dog. The 16-month-old cocker spaniel, called Snipe, has been undergoing training to sniff out tiny amounts of chlorine in tap water and is now undergoing trials in rural areas where leaks are hard to detect. Hopes are that Snipe's "sensitive nose" will prove successful where other technologies have so far failed. We'll keep you posted. *D. Telegraph, 11 Feb 2018.*

### FAIRY TROUBLE

Attentive readers may have noticed an outbreak of random passages of unusually dark type in our article on the new Fairy Census (FT362:30-37). We have been searching for an explanation for this hitherto unknown phenomenon, but to no avail. We have concluded that we must put it down to the Little People's anger at having their secrets aired in a public forum such as *FT*.

DAVID R. SUTTON

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PAUL SIEVEKING

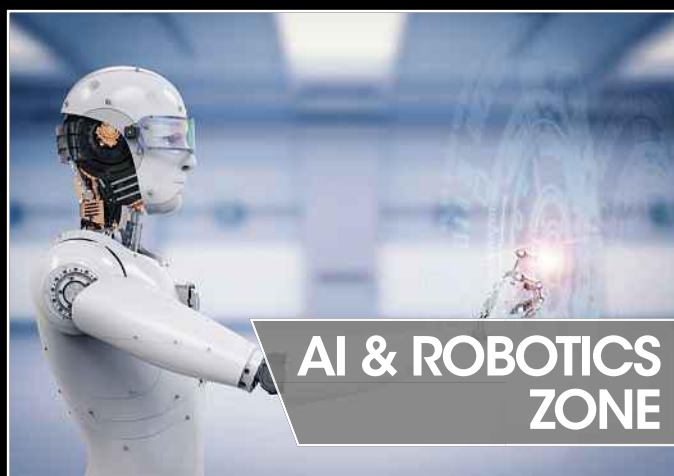
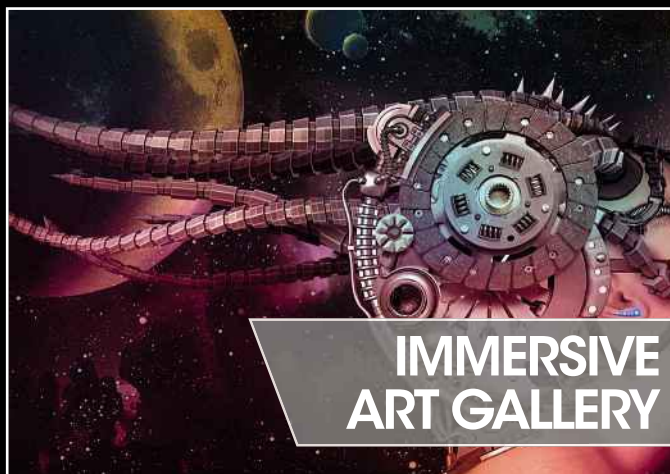


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A DIGEST OF THE WORLDWIDE WEIRD

# STRANGE DAYS

## WATER MAGIC

To the annoyance of scientists and sceptics, many people – including employees of the UK's major water companies, it turns out – continue to dowsing because it works...



HUGH THRELFALL / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: According to UK water companies, many employees continue to use divining rods to locate leaking pipes.

Water companies are continuing to use divining rods to find underground pipes, an Oxford University scientist has found. Sally Le Page began asking questions about the practice when her parents reported seeing an engineer from Severn Trent “walking around holding two bent tent pegs to locate a mains pipe” near their home in Stratford-upon-Avon. She contacted all the UK's water companies, and a majority confirmed engineers still use the centuries-old technique. However, a number said the equipment was not standard-issue equipment. A dowser will typically hold the rods, usually shaped like the letter L or Y, while walking over land and being alert for any movement to find water.

*“Isn't it a bit silly that big companies are using magic?”*

Evolutionary biologist Ms Le Page first contacted Severn Trent Water via Twitter. It replied: “We've found that some of the older methods are just as effective as the new ones, but we do use drones as well, and now satellites.” Other companies that gave a similar response were Anglian Water, Thames Water, Scottish Water, Southern Water, Welsh Water, United Utilities, Northumbrian Water, South West Water, and

Yorkshire Water. Only two – Northern Ireland Water and Wessex Water – said their engineers do not use them. Ms Le Page said: “I can't state this enough: there is no scientifically rigorous, doubly blind evidence that divining rods work. Isn't it a bit silly that big companies are still using magic to do their jobs?” (A fortean, of course, would answer that just because a phenomenon has yet to be explained scientifically does not prove it is a delusion.) All the companies emphasised they do not encourage the use of divining rods nor issue them to engineers, and said modern methods such as drones and listening devices were preferred.

Following publicity of Ms Le Page's findings, Christopher

Hassall, a specialist in water management at the Leeds University school of biology, expressed alarm at the continuing use of what he dismissed as witchcraft. (This prompts us to recall Fort's dictum: “Witchcraft always has a hard time until it becomes established and changes its name”.) For materialist reductionists, centuries of anecdotal evidence count for nothing. While several studies have appeared to show that twitching twigs are no better than chance at finding water, invoking the ideomotor effect (muscle movement caused by subconscious mental activity) fails to account for dowsers with consistently successful track records.

Several water firms have hastily distanced themselves from their own admissions that they use divining rods to detect leaks. Other companies did not deny that some of their engineers are still using diving rods, but stressed that they do not spend money on the practice. The industry's trade body, Water UK, blamed individual engineers. It said: “The reality is that water companies are spending millions of pounds each year on innovative leakage detection schemes such as thermal imaging drones, sonic listening devices and other high-tech electronic mapping equipment, which has helped reduce leakages by a third since the 1990s, and it's unlikely that a few individuals doing some unofficial divining has had much impact.”

The BBC Radio 4 presenter John Humphrys then waded into





## SURPRISE PASSENGERS

Koalas and other unlikely stowaways

PAGE 10



## IMPRESSIVE VINTAGE

World's oldest wine discovered in Georgia

PAGE 16



## PORTRAIT OF A LADY

Barbara van Beck, the hirsute maid

PAGE 26



ABOVE: Traditional methods of divining, using forked twigs and rods; bent coathangers appear to work too.  
BELOW: John Humphrys, whose own experiences with water divining have made him a believer.

the controversy. In about 1983, the old well that served his farmhouse in west Wales was on its last legs; the little water that came out of the taps was brown and almost certainly undrinkable. Getting mains water would have been prohibitively expensive, so a new borehole was required; but the dairy farm covered 140 acres and boreholes were expensive, so to avoid trial and error Humphrys was persuaded to seek the help of a man well known in the locality for his dowsing gift. The dowser, accompanied by a sceptical Humphrys, walked slowly round the farm and in the corner of the top field the former stopped and said: "Plenty here, but too far down. Cost too much to get it." In the opposite corner of the field he stopped again. "Ah... much better. Maybe 80ft [24m] but probably less. Ideal. Drill here." He had done without dowsing rods and refused any remuneration.

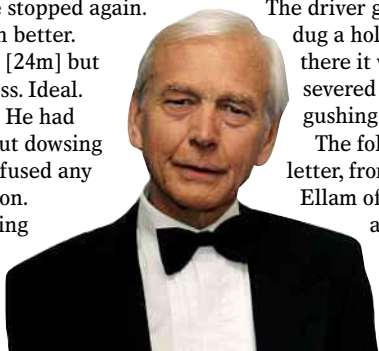
The drilling

company soon proved him correct – but was it just a lucky guess? A few months after the new water supply was connected to the house, Humphrys called in a contractor to plough the top field, after which the taps ran dry. The tractor driver said he must have accidentally cut the pipe from the tank and persuaded Humphrys to try dowsing for the leak using a bent coathanger. Despite feeling a "total fool", Humphrys crisscrossed the field and the coathanger twisted in his hands. "That's it," said the tractor driver, but Humphrys thought he had just lost his grip. He recalled: "OK [the driver] said, go back to the hedge and walk it again. I did. And the same thing happened at the same place.

The driver got a spade, dug a hole and there it was: the severed pipe, water gushing from it."

The following letter, from Richard Ellam of Bristol, appeared

in the *Guardian*: "As a hippyish young man I was taught to dowse in the early 1980s by a straight-laced quantity surveyor, who carried dowsing rods in the back of his car. A few years later I met a National Grid engineer, who also used dowsing to find lost underground cables. Both these men worked in environments where the success or failure of dowsing would be quickly apparent to their colleagues, and repeated failures would be mocked. If you tell a bunch of builders to dig a hole to find a pipe and it's not there you may be forgiven once, but twice is pushing it. These men dowsed because it worked. They didn't know why or how, but knew it worked. This is a difference between science and technology – technologists cheerfully do all kinds of things that they don't understand scientifically, because they work." *Guardian*, 20+23+28 Nov; *BBC News*, 21 Nov; *D.Telegraph*, 22 Nov; *D.Mail*, 22+24 Nov 2017.



CLAIRE GREENWAY / GETTY IMAGES

## EXTRA! EXTRA!



FT'S FAVOURITE HEADLINES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

**GRANDFATHER'S TESTICLE EXPLODES AFTER CONTRACTING RARE FORM OF SALMONELLA ON TUNISIAN HOLIDAY**

Bolton News, 8 Jan 2018.

**Woman welder 'wore fake beard and wig to kill half-sister with a casserole dish'**

D.Mail, 22 Nov 2016.

**MEERCAT EXPERT CLEARED OF ASSAULTING MONKEY HANDLER IN LOVE SPAT OVER LLAMA-KEEPER**

Treehugger, 24 Feb 2016.

**Asbo dwarf jailed after impersonating a dalek and threatening woman with a butterknife**

D.Telegraph (online), 9 May 2016.

**FALLING JARS OF NUTELLA RESULT IN MAN WITH RUPTURED PATELLA**

Camden New Journal, 15 June 2017.



# WHAT THE FLOCK!

A murmuration of starlings morphs into one giant bird in the skies over Spain's Costa Brava. Daniel Biber, 53, of Hilzingen in Germany, spent four days observing hundreds of thousands of birds before capturing the breathtaking event. He said: "It was only when I checked the pictures later that I realised what formation the starlings had created." The photograph earned him a top award. *D.Telegraph, Metro, 2 Jan 2018.*

PHOTO: Daniel Biber / SWNS









## SIDELINES...

### GHOSTS HAVING FUN

Somporn, 54, a man looking after some land and cattle in the area of Ban Chang, Rayong, Thailand, heard people apparently having a loud drinks party at 2am and went to investigate. The sound of the happy chatter got louder and louder as he cycled into a eucalyptus grove until he came upon an overgrown “Huang Sui” or Chinese gravestone – and pedalled away as fast as he could. Locals said that “mysterious things” happen there and no one dared go near it. *Thaivisa.com*, 8 Jan 2018.

### EARLIEST CUPPA

A 374-year-old shopping list may be the earliest reference to someone drinking tea in England. Curator Rachel Conroy from Temple Newsam House, near Leeds, found the 1644 bill for medical ingredients bought by the estate, which mentions bottles of “China drink”, the old name for tea, in the West Yorkshire Archives. Each bottle was priced at an exorbitant four shillings. *D.Telegraph*, 16 Jan 2018.

### TURNIP PRIZE

The six finalists for the Turnip Prize – a Turner Prize spoof that has run for 18 years from the New Inn in Wedmore, Somerset – included ‘Pulled Pork’ (a toy pig being pulled by a tractor) and ‘Minnie Driver’ (a small golf club). The prize is awarded to whomsoever creates what they consider to be rubbish art “using the least amount of effort possible”. Prize giving took place on 5 December. The winning entry in 2016 was a black pole named Pole Dark. *BBC News*, 23 Nov 2017.

# VANISHED IN THE HOLY LAND

An Irish cyclist has gone missing in the Negev desert, leaving a trail of religious clues



ANTOINETTE TAVENEAUX

ABOVE: The Negev seen from Mitzpe Ramon. ABOVE: Bible pages weighed down with rocks. OPPOSITE: Oliver McAfee.

Oliver McAfee, 29, from Dromore in County Down, Northern Ireland, went missing in late November while cycling through the Negev desert in southern Israel and has not been seen or heard from since. He gave up his gardening job in Essex in April to cycle across Europe and had covered about 8,700 miles (14,000 km) on what friends described as a voyage of personal discovery. It was initially thought that McAfee, a devout Christian, got lost while following a cycling path, but later clues led Israeli authorities to believe he chose to disappear into the desert.

His family contacted Israeli police about his disappearance in late December, prompting a search using drones, dogs and dozens of volunteers. The search team discovered a series of pages ripped from the Bible carefully weighed down with rocks in the area that he was last seen. Other handwritten notes quoting Bible verses were also discovered. Some of the notes included references to the story of Jesus fasting in the desert for 40 days and 40

## The search team found a series of pages ripped from the Bible



nights. Could McAfee be holed up in one of the caves that dot the landscape? The search team scoured the text in vain for clues. They also found what they described as “a chapel” apparently made by McAfee on top of a rocky desert ridge outside the town of Mitzpe Ramon. He had cleared a circular area of stones and used a bicycle tool to carefully

flatten the sand. “He seems to have been doing all kinds of ceremonies that we don’t really understand,” said one of the team. McAfee was last seen on 21 November, by an American tourist. His bicycle, hiking boots, camera, keys and wallet were recovered, but not his phone or his passport. The fact that his passport hasn’t turned up yet has given his family and friends hope and they know he has not left Israel, because officials say his passport has not crossed a border.

- The biblical clues led to the suspicion that McAfee might be suffering from Jerusalem Syndrome [see FT118:21, 129:47], a well-documented mental phenomenon where visitors to the Holy Land suffer religious delusions, including the belief that they are figures from the Bible or harbingers of the End Times. They may feel compelled to start preaching on the streets of the city. A police spokesman said: “We know [McAfee] was in Jerusalem and slept out in different areas – he didn’t go from hotel to hotel.”







Examples of Jerusalem Syndrome include: an Irish schoolteacher who came to a Jerusalem hospital convinced she was about to give birth to the Baby Jesus when in fact she was not even pregnant; a Canadian tourist who believed he was the strongman Samson and tried to tear stone blocks out of the Wailing Wall; and an Austrian man who flew into a rage in his hotel kitchen when staff refused to prepare the Last Supper for him.

Israel's health ministry records around 50 cases a year where a tourist's delusions are so strong that police or mental health professionals are forced to intervene. Many more incidents go undocumented on the streets of Jerusalem's Old City. Evidence of the syndrome dates back to mediæval times and observers throughout the centuries have noted the air of madness that seems to hang over the city. As JE Hanauer, a British traveller and Anglican vicar, wrote in about 1870: "It is an odd fact that many Americans who arrive at Jerusalem are either lunatics or lose their mind thereafter." Modern psychiatrists describe the sufferer's delusions as highly theatrical and very public. They will often rip hotel bed sheets into makeshift togas, deliver impromptu sermons in front of holy sites and go wailing through the streets. Curiously, the affliction has been recorded among Jews and Christians but not Muslims. A study from 1999 found that "Although Jerusalem is sacred to all three major monotheistic religions... no documentation regarding the syndrome among Muslims was found."

The majority of those who are hospitalised suffered mental health problems in their own countries and came to Jerusalem deliberately on what they saw as a mission from God. The afflicted are mostly harmless, but occasionally they become violent. Dr Moshe Kalian, the former district psychiatrist for Jerusalem,



described a British man who interpreted the ash cloud thrown over Europe by the 2010 eruption of Eyjafjallajökull, the Icelandic volcano, as a sign that world was coming to an end. Once the ash cloud cleared and air travel resumed, he flew to Jerusalem and headed to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, where Christians believe Jesus was crucified and buried. He planned to enter the Church and be killed by Satan, triggering Armageddon. However, by the time he arrived, the church's heavy wooden doors were closed for the night. The unnamed man then took a knife and charged at Israeli police. They shot him in the side and sent him to a psychiatric hospital, from which he was eventually returned to Britain without charges.

The most contentious point of debate among scholars of Jerusalem Syndrome is what one group of doctors has called Type III cases: people with no history of mental illness who become overwhelmed by the city's religiosity and temporarily lose their minds. "The third type of Jerusalem Syndrome is perhaps the most fascinating," wrote the psychiatrists from Kfar Shaul Mental Health Centre, the Jerusalem hospital where most sufferers are treated. They have

recorded 42 cases of people who arrived in Jerusalem as regular tourists, suffered severe psychotic episodes while there, and then recovered completely after leaving the city.

Of the 42 individuals, 40 were from what doctors described as "ultra-religious" Protestant families. Among them was a Swiss lawyer who arrived in Jerusalem as part of a tour of the Mediterranean. He spent a perfectly happy week with friends in Greece before reaching Jerusalem, where he became obsessed with ritual purity and started wearing sheets as a gown and calling out verses from the Bible. Within

days he recovered and went on with his group to Egypt, apparently never suffering any mental health problems again. Dr Kalian and others are sceptical of this "pure" form of the syndrome and argue that the patients are more likely to have had some underlying psychiatric condition. "Jerusalem Syndrome should be regarded as an aggravation of a chronic mental illness and not a transient psychotic episode," they wrote.

Comparable phenomena have been found in other cities. Stendhal Syndrome describes the breakdowns that art-lovers sometimes suffer in Florence when confronted by the grandeur of Renaissance frescoes. Japanese tourists in Paris sometimes have manic episodes when they realise a city they have idealised as the most romantic place on Earth contains all the rubbish, traffic and overcrowding of any other major urban area. Known as Paris Syndrome, the affliction is thought to be exacerbated by jetlag and the cultural and language barriers in the way of Japanese visitors. Neither condition, however, is as severe or as frequently observed as Jerusalem Syndrome. *D.Telegraph*, 27 Mar 2016, 17 Jan 2018; *Belfast Telegraph Digital*, 16 Jan; *BBC News*, 17 Jan 2018.

## SIDELINES...

### RACCOON SABOTEUR

At 2.10am on 28 July, a raccoon wandered into a power station in the Berlin suburb of Siemensstadt, causing a short-circuit in an 110,000-volt transformer and an explosion heard up to four miles away that woke up thousands of Berliners. A turbine ground to a halt, causing a loud droning noise for 35 minutes. The raccoon was unscathed. *Times*, 29 July 2017.

### ELECTRIC MARATHON

On 22 October, a horizontal lightning flash passed about 250 miles (400km) across the plains from Oklahoma to Missouri. The extraordinary phenomenon was caught on camera by a new satellite, GOES-16, equipped with a special lightning detector. If confirmed, this flash easily beats the previous world record for a single horizontal lightning flash – 199.5 miles ((321km) across Oklahoma on 20 June 2007. *Times*, 11 Nov 2017.

### TRAPPED UNDER HOUSE

A 37-year-old woman was trapped under a derelict house in Melbourne for up to four nights before being discovered by a neighbour who heard scratching and murmuring under the kitchen floor on 24 June 2017. Firefighters freed the "extremely dehydrated and incoherent" woman, "believed to be a squatter", by cutting through the floorboards. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26+27 June 2017.

### POTTY PUSSY

A five-year-old pet cat called Paddy, belonging to Paul and Lesley Terry of Newmarket, Suffolk, stole and dragged home 25 flowerpots. "Other cats bring home mice," said Paul, "but I was impressed when he brought a lily in a pot." *Sun*, 28 Nov 2016.

### NATURE FOLLOWS ART

Police found a real dead body on the set of *Replik*, the BBC's new serial killer drama. Filming of a fictional murder victim was halted after a body was found at Cambridge Heath Park in east London. And Richard Dormer, who played a character scarred by an acid attack, contracted impetigo so that his face was covered in blotches and blemishes. *Independent (online)*, 18 Sept 2017.





## SIDELINES...

### MACABRE LUGGAGE

Workmen clearing a rough sleepers' camp in Totnes, Devon, on 17 July found a human skull in a plastic bag. "What are you doing with my skull?" said a man, before leading them to the bank of the River Dart where another skull in a plastic bag was found. The skulls were determined to be between 60 and 100 years old, and the police planned to give them back, as no crime had been committed. *Western Daily Press*, 21 July 2017.

### DUMB OR WHAT?

An Australian copped a two-year prison term after reporting for bail with a carload of drugs and weapons. Jake Kevin Watts, 23, was caught with methamphetamines, seven knuckledusters, two guns, and two magazines after driving to Rockhampton police station while disqualified. (*Queensland Courier Mail*, 8 Sept 2017.

### NOT THAT BRIGHT

A 26-year-old woman arriving at court on a drugs charge parked in the local police chief's spot while smoking a spliff. She was handed a second drugs possession summons at Long Island, New York. *Metro*, 7 Dec 2017.

### CHARMED TAVERN

The landlord has become the third person at a Lincolnshire pub to win £1m on the National Lottery. Ian Brooke, 43, who runs the Mallard in Scunthorpe, picked up the prize in the EuroMillions draw on 28 July. In 2015, two of his regular customers, David and Kathleen Long, became the first people to win a EuroMillions prize of £1m twice, following their first win in 2013, with Camelot claiming the odds were 283 billion to one. *BBC News*, 15 Aug 2017.

### MEATBALL MOUNTAIN

On 15 November, 20 tonnes of Swedish meatballs blocked the Skara-Lundsbrunn road in southwest Sweden. The trailer of a lorry had skidded into a ditch in the icy evening conditions, taking the meatball mountain with it. The lorry itself remained on the road, but all the meatballs had to be offloaded onto the carriageway before the trailer could be hauled out of the ditch. *BBC News*, 17 Nov 2017.

## ENGINE SURPRISES

From squirrel sabotage to accidental stowaways...



JANE BRISTER

ABOVE: Kelli, the female koala who survived a 10-mile ride clinging to a wheel arch. BELOW: Shazam the screech owl.

Andrew Wilkins, 25, an estate agent from Reigate in Surrey, and his girlfriend, Jen, 26, flew out of the UK on 20 November to travel around Vietnam, Thailand and India for five weeks. While they were away, Andrew left his Volkswagen Golf at Jen's father's home near Crawley in Surrey. When they returned on 23 December, he was dismayed to find the gearstick of his car, which he paid £10,000 for in 2014, was stiff and changing gear was difficult. On 29 December, he took the car to the PTA garage in Oxted, Surrey. It turned out that a squirrel (or squirrels) had turned it into a winter store for hundreds of acorns. The glove compartment and gearbox were full of acorns, and there were more acorns, as well as a dead rat, under the bonnet. "I feel bad," said Andrew. "I ruined their winter and all their hard work". Removing nuts and rodent took two hours, for which the garage charged £168. *independent.co.uk*, 2 Jan 2018.

- A koala survived a 10-mile (16km) journey in Australia on 16 September, stuck under a car until the driver stopped in Adelaide and heard the distressed animal's cries. "Early in his journey an oncoming driver flashed his lights at him



SALEM NEW HAMPSHIRE POLICE DEPARTMENT

and so he thought there must be something wrong with his car," said Jane Brister, who was called out from Fauna Rescue. The driver pulled over, but couldn't find anything in the dark. The female koala had crawled into the wheel arch of the four-wheel drive vehicle while it was parked in the hills on the outskirts of Adelaide.

The crew of a passing fire engine stopped and took off the wheel so that Ms Brister could coax out the petrified animal. "[At first] I could really only see her face and one paw," said Ms Brister. "She was pinned behind the wheel, but fortunately not [caught] in the axle. It took a lot of time and patience to get her out." The koala escaped with a





ABOVE: 'Bear Grylls', the lucky koala who was hit by a car doing over 60 miles an hour but escaped with only minor injuries.

few cuts and singed fur, and was taken to a nearby vet. She was dubbed Kelli, the name of one of the firefighters who came to her rescue. After being cleaned up and monitored for a week, she was released back into the bush. She was last seen dozing in a eucalyptus tree. There are as few as 100,000 koalas left in the world. *BBC News*, 16 Sept; *Sky News*, 17 Sept; *Times*, *D.Mail*, 18 Sept 2017.

- Another koala was named 'Bear Grylls' in 2015 after it became wedged in the grille of a vehicle travelling at 100km/h (62mph) in the Adelaide Hills. Loren Davis saw the koala in her headlights, but was unable to stop in time. She only discovered it was trapped in the grille when she got home 10km (six miles) away. It only suffered minor abrasions. Three weeks earlier, another koala was caught by the head in a car grille in Adelaide's southern suburbs, and escaped unscathed. Apparently, koalas often display a casual disregard for vehicular traffic. *ABC Radio (Adelaide)*, 24 Sept 2015.

- When mechanics at an auto repair shop in New Hampshire opened the bonnet of a car to do an oil change, they were confronted by an Eastern screech owl sitting on the engine. "We figured he was either seeking warmth or chasing a mouse," said a police officer. The

police department named the owl "Shazam", probably for the bird of prey's ability to suddenly appear like some sort of magic trick. According to Audubon.org: "Despite the name, screech-owls do not screech; the voice of this species features whinnies and soft trills." Police said the bird was "very friendly" and was "easily handled". Because the owl appeared lethargic, it was transported to "On The Wing," a wildlife rehabilitation centre in Epping, New Hampshire. People responding to the police department's Facebook post thought the whole situation was a hoot. "That's a real case of Hoo-Dunnit," one person wrote. *Boston Globe*, 16 Dec 2017.

- A rabbit ended up 12 miles (19km) from home after hopping on a car and getting trapped inside the engine. Residents spotted the pet and left a note on the windscreen of the parked car to warn the driver. However, the motorist spoke little English and couldn't understand the message. He only realised there was a rabbit on board when he got home. He discovered the animal stowed away under the bonnet and called in the RSPCA. The charity's Manchester and Salford branch appealed on Facebook for the owner to claim the pet, which was thought to be between four and five months old. *D.Express*, 12 Aug 2017.

- A buzzard was hit by a van and survived for 12 hours with its head stuck in the front grille. The bird of prey was discovered by workers at a car rental company in Swindon, Wiltshire, after the driver of the rented Ford Transit failed to spot it wedged in the bodywork. Realising it was still alive, they took the grille part to free it. It had a broken wing and dislocated leg, but after being taken to a vet, it was set to make a full recovery. *Western Daily Press*, 20 June 2016.

- A bear took a ride on top of a garbage truck in New Mexico in late July and travelled for at least five miles (8km) on the vehicle before arriving at a site where the Santa Fe Forest Service kept a firefighting helicopter, where it made its escape up a tree. *Western Daily Press*, 5 Aug 2017.

- Georgie Knox from Airdrie, Alberta, Canada, found a coyote she had hit was embedded in the front of her car, but still alive. A pedestrian flagged her down after spotting the North American wild dog, made famous by the Wile E Coyote character in *Road Runner* cartoons, wedged in the grille. It was unhurt, despite travelling 20 miles (32km). It was checked by vets before being freed back into the wild. *Sun*, 14 Sept 2017.

## SIDELINES...

### METAL MYSTERY

Metal pieces of unknown origin fell from the sky onto the rubber plantation of Pajit Yotharak in Ubon Ratchathani, Thailand, following the sound of an explosion at 2am on 15 November. The local Flight Control Centre said that no airplane crash had been reported, but promised to investigate. *The Nation (Thailand)*, 15 Nov 2017.

### A POUND OF FLESH

For weeks last October and November, residents of Berghusen in southwestern Germany were mystified by the regular appearance of a pound of raw mincemeat on the tracks of the local railway station. This happened mostly on Mondays, near the fence. Was it art, they wondered... Police in nearby Karlsruhe said they had more important things to worry about. *Irish Times*, 16 Nov 2017.

### SNAIL SURVIVORS

A snail swallowed by an owl survived after passing through its digestive tract. John McEvoy photographed the snail attached to a pellet in Luton, Bedfordshire. A 2011 study found that 15 per cent of snails eaten by birds survive. *D.Mirror*, 3 Nov 2017.

### NOMINATIVE DETERMINISM

Researchers have worked out how horses ended up with just one toe per foot. "The centre digit was compensating simultaneously for increasing body size and reducing side digits," said Brianna McHorse, lead author of the research and a PhD candidate at Harvard. *Guardian*, 24 Aug 2017.





## SIDELINES...

### MOUNTAINEERING SEAL

A seal was rescued after it climbed 60ft (18m) up a steep cliff in Wales on 20 November. The pup was spotted near the cliff edge at Bull Bay, Amlwch. An RSPCA officer said he was "gob-smacked" to find the creature so far from the water. *D.Post*, 23 Nov 2017.

### NO WAY TO LIGHT UP

Police in Bismarck, North Dakota, arrested Skyler Whitebull, 29, for possession of crystal meth after driving past a gas station and spotting Whitebull, of Cannon Ball, attempting to light a cigarette with the nozzle of a petrol pump. *Providence (RI) Journal*, 15 Oct 2017.

### FERRET INTRUDER

A woman was jolted awake in her northwest Sydney house at 10.30am on 20 November to find a pure white ferret biting into her cheek. It had apparently gained entry via a "doggie door". Her husband helped her get the militant mammal off her face and they chased it away. *(Sydney) D.Telegraph*, 21 Nov 2017.

### INDIGESTIBLE

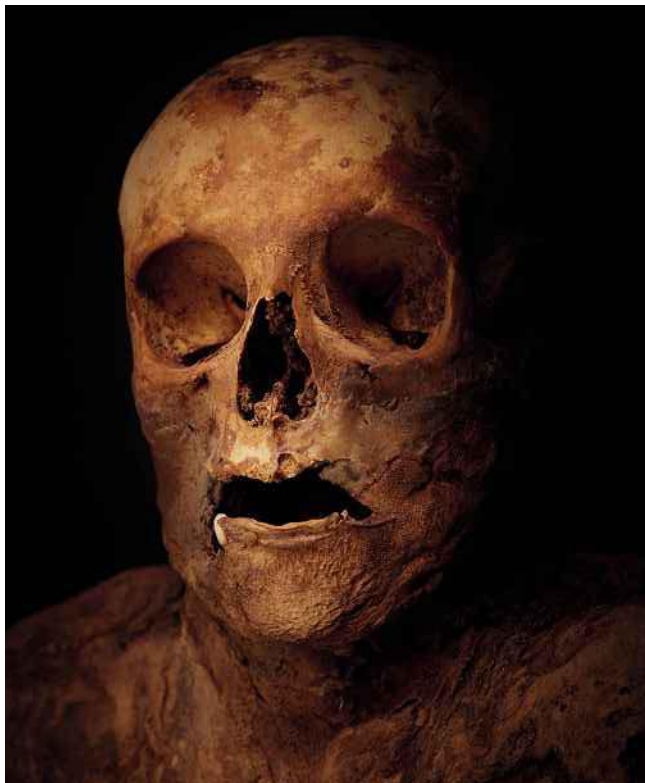
The stomach pains of a 16-year-old boy in Punjab, India, were caused by a 32oz (900g) mass of wood and plastic he had consumed. *Sun*, 11 Nov 2017.

### CATS' HUMAN MEAL

The corpse of a recluse in Omsk, Siberia, was licked clean of flesh by his 40 pet cats. The 68-year-old man is thought to have died of natural causes a month before his bones were discovered. The cats were unable to escape and ate their owner before turning on each other. Only one survived. *Times*, 12 Aug 2017.

## SKULL AND BONES

Boris's great grand mummy and a spooky bit of space rock



GREGOR BRÄNDLI

ABOVE: The mummy of Anna Catharina Bischoff (1719-1787), seven-times great grandmother of Boris Johnson (below). BOTTOM: A reconstruction showing Anna Catharina as she might have looked in life.

### BORIS'S SWISS MUMMY

During renovation work on the Barfüsser Church in Basel in 1975, a woman's body wearing expensive clothes was unearthed in front of the altar. Known as "Switzerland's most famous mummy", the unknown woman's body was riddled with mercury, a standard treatment for syphilis from the late 15th to the 19th century. Highly toxic mercury treatment more often killed than cured, and it was this that preserved her body. The discovery of new archives last year revealed that the mummy had been discovered once before, in 1843, and had been linked to a wealthy Basel family.

DNA from one of the mummy's big toes was compared to genetic material from a suspected modern relative. Not

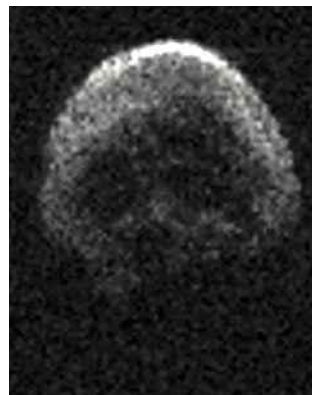


only was it a 99.8 per cent match, showing that the woman belonged to the Bischoff family, but further archival research showed she was Anna Catharina Bischoff, born in 1719 in Basel, where she died in 1787. Genealogists showed that she is the seven-times great grandmother of Britain's Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson. Anna

Catharina married a clergyman and spent most of her adult life in Strasbourg. She may have contracted syphilis while caring for patients with sexually transmitted diseases. After the death of her husband she returned to Basel. *BBC News*, 25 Jan; *D.Telegraph*, 26 Jan 2018.

### HALLOWE'EN ASTEROID

Asteroid 2015 TB145 became nicknamed the "Halloween asteroid" after its skull-like form whizzed by 300,000 miles (483,000km) from Earth on 31 October 2015, just a little bit farther away from us than the Moon. This skull-like space rock, a slightly flattened ellipsoid, measures about 2,100ft (640m) across and is categorised as a PHA (Potentially Hazardous Asteroid). It will approach again next November, when it will skim past Earth at about a quarter of the distance as that to the Sun. When last observed, its flashes of reflected light indicated that it was rotating about once every three hours, although some data suggested once every five hours. The flashes were few and far between, however, since the asteroid's surface is thickly coated with molecules that reflect only five or six per cent of the light that hits it. "This means that it is very dark, only slightly more reflective than charcoal," said astrophysicist Pablo Santos-Sanz from the Institute of Astrophysics of Andalusia. Apt, perhaps, given its foreboding shape. *europe.newsweek.com*, *unexplained-mysteries.com*, 21 Dec 2017.



LANDESMUSEUM ZÜRICH / SRP

KIRSTY WIGGLESWORTH - WPA POOL / GETTY IMAGES



MARTIN ROSS



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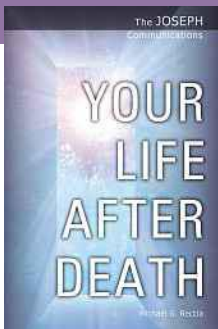
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## Establishment



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# Strange harvest of the cold months

DAVID HAMBLING makes the most of his winter by searching out some chilly weather phenomena

This winter has seen some extraordinarily low temperatures in the United States, and that has led to some extraordinary phenomena. In some cases, what was happening was reasonably easy to explain. In other instances, the happenings were – initially at least – baffling.

The case of the falling lizards was straightforward, if weird. Iguanas are a common invasive species in Florida, and in the recent cold spell they were literally dropping off their perches and lying on the ground, legs in the air. Iguanas are cold-blooded creatures unable to generate their own body heat. Below about 10°C (50°F) they get increasingly sluggish, and at 4°C (39°F) they are not able to function at all and just lie comatose. They recover when left out in the sun, though the local wildlife commission urged people to use the opportunity to capture them.

The booming sounds heard on 27 January in Ozaukee County, Wisconsin, were more puzzling. Some people reported that their houses shook and windows rattled in what appeared to be a miniature earthquake; one resident told the authorities that they heard five separate explosions. While mystery booms in California have been blamed on secret military aircraft tests and nicknamed ‘sky quakes’, the cause here appears to have been a cryoseism or ‘frost quake’. This is a rare but well-established effect that occurs during sharp cold spells. Normally when rock saturated with water freezes, the expanding ice slowly causes small cracks in the surface, known as freeze-thaw weathering. This breaks up bedrock over a period of many years.

A cryoseism is far more dramatic. The surface layer of water freezes, capping the water below. The expanding ice exerts more and more pressure until an entire section of rock or frozen dirt gives way with a tremendous boom or crack. One of the first documented frost quakes occurred in Deerfield, Massachusetts, in 1819. Witnesses reported a loud ‘bang’ in the early hours, and geologist Edward Hitchcock located a large crack in the frozen ground. Since then, many cryoseisms have been recorded, though they rarely show up on seismographs because their area of effect is so much smaller than earthquakes.



LEFT: A snow roller in Lanarkshire.

this gives rise to what are known as ‘Slurpee waves’ after a frozen soft drink. In January, surfers visiting the beach at Nantucket, Massachusetts, were surprised to find waves made of slush where frazil ice had reached the shore. The most eerie aspect of the scene was the silence: rather than the roar of breakers, the slush waves folded over soundlessly. They lasted for several hours, giving local photographers a chance to take

spectacular pictures before the sea froze over completely.

Lake Erie also witnessed an unusual phenomenon in January: ice shove. This occurs when an onshore wind pushes a sheet of ice up the beach, causing it to fracture and pile up. The result was a ridge of ice blocks along the shoreline more than 10m (33ft) high and several hundred metres long. Similar ice shoves have been known to destroy lakefront properties, and in this case West Lakeshore Drive was closed for some time as the blocks of ice spilled over it like an icy landslide.

While Britain was not lucky (or unlucky) enough to experience these extreme effects, at least one unusual phenomenon was spotted. Snow rollers are giant, cylindrical snowballs, often hollow in the middle [see **FT260:6-7**]. They are formed when there is strong wind and a covering of snow damp enough to stick together. The wind lifts up the edge of a sheet of snow and rolls it over; as in the process of building a snowman, the roller picks up snow from the ground and can grow to considerable size.

In January, hundreds of snow rollers were photographed in Lanarkshire, each with a trail behind it. Again, rollers are rare because they require the right balance of conditions. If it is too cold, the snow is dry and does not stick together. The wind has to be strong enough to start rollers going, but not so strong it breaks them up and blows the snow away.

Climate change scientists suggest that severe winters may become more common. In which case ice quakes and Slurpee waves may become the new normal, and the conditions that give rise to them will become better understood.

They can damage plaster, and move small objects and furniture, but there have never been reported casualties.

The spectacular ‘ice pillars’ seen over many parts of North America were easy to explain, though startling to some. They look exactly like pillars of light descending from (or rising into) the sky; *Washington Post* reporter Kathryn Prociw thought it looked “as if a Canadian town is being abducted by aliens.”

Also known as light pillars, ice pillars are common inside the Arctic Circle, but the cold snap brought them much further south than usual. An ice pillar is an optical illusion, like a rainbow, but caused by reflection rather than refraction. In the cold, moisture in the air crystallises out as tiny flakes. These crystals tend to be hexagonal and flat, and align themselves roughly horizontally as they slowly drift down. The crystals in the air above a light source reflect it back to an observer, giving the illusion of a pillar of light above the source. The effect is most dramatic at night, when different coloured artificial lights – orange, blue, white – send up rods of light.

The low temperature may also cause the sea to freeze over, sometimes with surprising results. Seawater normally freezes at about minus 4°C, and the ice forms as small needle-like crystals, each 3mm or 4mm long, known as frazil ice. Where the ocean is smooth, the crystals join together in a single unbroken sheet, but in rough water they form into rough, slushy discs known as pancake ice. These are the curious ‘ice circles’ in the 1914 postcard published in the last issue [**FT363:71**].

In a rough sea the slushy ice can remain for some time before freezing over, and





**TOP:** Light pillars photographed by Sophie Melanson in Moncton, New Brunswick, on 29 Dec 2017. **ABOVE:** And by Ray Majoran in London, Ontario, on 13 Jan 2018.



**PAUL SIEVEKING** finds a new resting place for St Nicholas and evidence of a very early vintage

## CONCRETE TO LAST

The reason why ancient Roman concrete sea walls have lasted more than two millennia while modern concrete, embedded with steel, crumbles within decades has long puzzled engineers. Pliny the Elder, writing in AD 79, noted that concrete structures in ancient harbours “became a single stone mass, impregnable to the waves, and every day stronger,” despite being battered constantly by seawater. Now US scientists think they have found the answer: when saltwater mixes with the volcanic ash and lime used by the Romans, it leads to the growth of interlocking minerals, making the concrete virtually impenetrable.

Roman engineers made concrete by mixing volcanic ash with lime and water to make a mortar, and then added chunks of volcanic rock. The combination produced what is called a pozzolanic reaction, named after the city of Pozzuoli in the Bay of Naples, prompting the formation of crystals in the mixture as it sets. These are made of minerals such as phillipsite and aluminous tobermorite. The same reaction happens in nature, and clumps of natural cement can be found in volcanic areas, which is possibly what gave the Romans the idea. The exact recipe for Roman concrete has been lost, but the team, led by Marie Jackson, a geology research professor at the University of Utah, is working on a cement that will allow sea defences to last for centuries. *D.Telegraph, Guardian, 4 July 2017.*

## HUNT FOR ST NICHOLAS

Archaeologists believe they have located the tomb of the original Father Christmas – St Nicholas – beneath a church in Demre, Antalya, built on the ruins of ancient Myra, birthplace of the fourth century bishop. Cemil Karabayram, head of Antalya’s monument authority, said the crypt was discovered in the centre of the Byzantine church during an electronic survey. “We believe this shrine has not been damaged at all, but it is quite difficult to get to as there are mosaics on the floor,” he said. Excavation work will allow scholars to access the temple grounds below the church to determine whether Nicholas’s body is there.

St Nicholas of Myra was known for his generosity towards children. He had a reputation for secret gift-giving, such as putting coins in the shoes of those who left them out for him, a practice celebrated on his feast day, 6 December. At the time of his death in AD 343, he was interred where the church at Demre now stands. This was built to host his tomb and was completed in AD 520. It was previously thought that merchants carried out a pious theft in 1087,



**ABOVE:** St Nicholas church in Demre, Antalya.  
**LEFT:** One of the earthenware jars from Tbilisi.

smuggling the saint’s bones to Bari in Italy. Christians still visit the site of what was thought to be the final resting place of the stolen bones in Bari’s Basilica di San Nicola. Some of the bones ended up in Venice, and a fragment of pelvis kept in St Martha of Bethany church in Illinois and said to belong to St Nicholas has recently been carbon-dated in Oxford to the fourth century AD. Of course, this doesn’t prove that the pelvis belongs to the saint, merely that such an identification is not impossible. However, based on local documents and ceramics, Turkish experts are now claiming the bones removed in 1087 belong to another local priest rather than the celebrated bishop. *D.Telegraph, Guardian, 5 Oct; Metro, D.Express, 7 Dec 2017.*

## WORLD’S OLDEST WINE

Earthenware jars from about 6000 BC, found south of Tbilisi in Georgia, have revealed the earliest evidence of grape wine-making. Some of the jars bore images of grape clusters and a man dancing. The finds were published in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (PNAS). “We

believe this is the oldest example of the domestication of a wild-growing Eurasian grapevine solely for the production of wine,” said co-author Stephen Batiuk, a senior researcher at the University of Toronto. “Wine is central to civilisation as we know it in the West. As a medicine, social lubricant, mind-altering substance and highly valued commodity, wine became the focus of religious cults, pharmacopoeias, cuisines, economies and society in the ancient Near East.”

The pottery jars were discovered in two Neolithic villages, called Gadachrili Gora and Shulaveris Gora, about 30 miles (50km) south of Tbilisi. Telltale chemical signs of wine were discovered in eight jars, the oldest one dating from about 5,980 BC. Large jars called *qvevri*, similar to the ancient ones, are still used for wine-making in Georgia. Mr Batiuk said the wine was probably made in a similar way to the *qvevri* method today “where the grapes are crushed and the fruit, stems and seeds are all fermented together”.

Previously, the earliest evidence of grape wine-making had been found in the Zagros Mountains of Iran in 1968 and dated to 5,400-5,000 BC. In 2011, a wine press and fermentation jars from about 6,000 years ago were found in a cave in Armenia [FT278:23]. Organic residue in storage jars found in a cave in Sicily in 2012 showed that wine was made here 6,000 years ago. The world’s earliest non-grape based wine is believed to be a fermented alcoholic beverage of rice, honey and fruit found in China and dating to about 7,000 BC. *Guardian, 30 Aug; BBC News, 13 Nov 2017.*





# CLASSICAL CORNER

FORTEANA FROM THE ANCIENT WORLD COMPILED BY BARRY BALDWIN

## 222: THE COMMON TOUCH

Our royal family (prefer the Royles, myself) has come a long way from forcing Princess Margaret to jettison her beloved Group Captain Peter Townsend to accepting (publicly, at least) Meghan Markle, an American of mixed Afro-Anglo ancestry, with Catholic background and one divorce under her belt after a seven-year dalliance without benefit of clergy to a Hollywood actor-producer.

Egyptian pharaohs bypass the issue by habitually marrying their sisters. So, also, the Ptolemies from Alexander the Great's time down to Cleopatra, herself marrying two brothers, possibly bumping off both.

Apart from a very early and (both to them and us) misty regal period, Athens was royalty-free. During its fifth-century BC apogee, the nearest it had to a ruler (as Thucydides, bk2 ch65 para9, acidly observed) was the number one democrat, Pericles. Originally married to a relative (name unknown), he divorced her in 445 BC, after fixing her up with a second husband, and spent the rest of his life living 'over the brush' with Aspasia, a notorious woman from a notorious city – Miletus, a raffish place credited with inventing dildos and double-beds – where (so claim Aristophanes and fellow-comedians) she was both prostitute and brothel-monger. Plutarch (Pericles, ch24) provides a full survey, with lavish quotation and half-hearted apology for including such material. Persian prince Cyrus was so gaga over her that he named his favourite mistress Aspasia, and when he was killed, she was taken to the new monarch and acquired Mrs Keppel-like influence over him.

Rome provides richer pickings. No surprise that Caligula heads the list. After conducting a clandestine affair, he married Milonia Caesonia, a woman of modest background, neither young nor beautiful, and an unpopular choice – anyone say Camilla? Caligula also had a passionate relationship with the actor Mnester, subsequently a lover of both Poppaea's (Nero's future empress) mother and Claudius's third wife Messalina – great *Hello!* fodder – also routinely shagging his trio of sisters. Icing on the marital cake: premaritally pregnant, Caesonia gave birth on the wedding day – presumably kiboshing honeymoon-night bliss, although with Caligula you never know. Suetonius says Caligula loved her madly, this erotomania the result of her



causing his insanity by dosing him with an aphrodisiac (Juvenal, Satire 6, vv615-20). Being Caligula, he expressed his love in ways that varied from showing her naked to his close friends to threatening to have her tortured or killed. And, killed she was, with him in the assassination of 24 January AD 41, the killers (Caligula's discontented guards) for good measure dashing out their infant daughter's brains against a wall. As the Victorian lady is supposed to have said after watching *Antony and Cleopatra*: "How very different from the home life of our own dear Queen."

Although linked to royalty as secretary to Claudius's mother, one might say of Cænis as Kitty Muggeridge said of David Frost: Risen Without Trace. Cænis ascended from slavery to *maitresse en titre* for emperor Vespasian, then after his empress died, she became "his wife in all but name." Famous for her photographic (nowadays called 'eidetic') memory when amanuensis, she dominated Vespasian who winked at the fortune she amassed by selling favours, honours and offices. Socially, she was snubbed by Vespasian's son Domitian, a bit rich from one who consorted with and had a mania for depilating his chosen prostitutes.

The best-laid plans of mice and emperors... Vespasian's son and successor Titus was madly in love with Jewish princess Berenice, promised her marriage, but was forced to renege by violent public opposition. Such an alliance, of course, was hardly propitious, it being hardly a decade since the hard-fought Roman-Jewish War. And, a reminder that emperors frequently had to bow to vox populi. This pair of doomed star-crossed lovers regresses to Margaret-Townsend, on whom, and the wider question of royal suitabilities, see

Craig Brown's *Ma'am Darling: 99 Glimpses of Princess Margaret* (2017).

Trajan married the well-connected but non-royal Plotina. Unlike him, she had a bent towards Greek philosophy, which she probably needed to cope with a husband famously addicted to drink and boys – obvious reasons for their having no children. Plotina was accused of forging his dying adoption of Hadrian, in cahoots with her lover Attianus (military type), also with poisoning him. The latter charge, though, is standard, being also levelled against (e.g.) Livia and Agrippina.

Bishop Ambrose was the first to describe Helena, wife of emperor Constantius, mother of Constantine the first Christian emperor, as *stabularia*, which can indicate either a barmaid or stable-girl. Either way, a predictable source of amusement to Edward Gibbon, a major influence on Waugh's novel *Helena* (1950), still the best introduction to her.

Last and most entertaining is Theodora, taken to wife by Byzantine Emperor Justinian in 525. Justinian's imperial uncle Justin I complacently repealed the law banning marriage with actresses. Theodora was as low social drawer as you could get, daughter of a circus bear-trainer and part-time tart. As a pre-pubescent, her idea of a good time was anal intercourse. Upon maturing "for real sex", she graduated to dinner-parties-cum-orgies with a dozen lusty lads whom she would shag senseless before taking on their slaves, this impressive tally leaving her "still unsatisfied". Whilst being penetrated in all three orifices, she wished Nature had added more to her nipples. Her special set-piece was to lie on her back in public, have slaves sprinkle birdseed over her genitals and have trained geese pluck them off and eat them. Quite puts Fergie and her toe-sucking paramour in the shade.

Once empress, though, this stopped. Apart from a few discreet murders, she now devoted herself to wifely duties – once steeling Justinian to resist a riot of circus hooligans demanding his abdication, promoting the Monophysite heresy, and with the convert's traditional zeal forcing prostitutes into a Convent of Repentance, from whose walls many jumped to their deaths in despairing frustration. Theodora died in 548, the earliest documented victim of breast cancer.

The Red-Tops would have loved her...





# The Romans in Britain: Part One

ALAN MURDIE descends the cellar steps to relive a famous tale of ghostly Roman soldiers

Yorkshireman Harry Martindale (1935–2014) provided us with what is arguably the most significant and celebrated British apparitional sighting of the 20th century. 2018 marks the 65th anniversary of his famous 1953 sighting of a group of Roman soldiers passing through the cellars of the Treasurer's House in York. Called by ghost hunter Richard Felix "The best ghost story in the World" in the decades since it has been told, cited and anthologised numerous times, over the last 44 years since it came to public notice via a book, *Ghosts of an Ancient City* (1974) by John V Mitchell.

It is a very simple but highly impressive ghost story. Harry Martindale was training as a heating engineer and plumber. Early in 1953, aged 18, he was sent down into the ancient cellars of Treasurer's House, a charming building constructed by Thomas Young, Archbishop of York, between 1562 and 1568. This stood on the site of an earlier house occupied by the mediæval treasurers of the city. Restored by its last private owner between 1897 and 1930, it was presented to the National Trust in 1930.

Working in the cellar, Martindale was perched atop a short ladder when he suddenly heard a musical note echoing from the walls, like the blast of a trumpet. Suddenly he was astonished to see a white horse come through the wall, ridden by a helmeted Roman soldier. Following it were a column of armed legionaries. Shocked, he fell from his ladder as these figures passed him by. "I didn't count – I was in no state to

count," he said, "but I would say there were at least 20" (interview, *The Y-Files* (1999) available on YouTube). The figures looked completely lifelike, but each was cut off at the knees by the level of the flagstones. These were not finely turned-out imperial soldiers marching in triumphant conquest, but a pale, ragged and exhausted-looking band. He noticed the shields they carried were round, not rectangular in design as typically portrayed in history books, and he absorbed the fact some wore green tunics. Crossing the cellar, the figures disappeared into the opposite wall. Hastening out of the cellar as quickly as possible, Martindale emerged upstairs whey-faced and badly shaken, to be given a knowing look by one of the museum staff, who said: "You've seen the Romans haven't you?" Martindale took two weeks off from work to recover. He learned later that the same figures had been seen periodically since the 1930s. The single figure of a Roman soldier had also supposedly appeared one evening, being mistaken for a guest at a fancy dress party!

Perhaps understandably, Martindale quit plumbing, joining the police force and becoming a well-respected local officer. For many years he didn't tell his story beyond a small circle of family and friends for fear of ridicule, until he shared it with John Mitchell who was writing his book on the ghosts of York. Replete with curious anecdotal details, his account contained what seemed like hallmarks of a genuine experience. Mitchell arranged for local

historians to quiz Martindale about his sighting. The conclusion was that the ghosts dated from the later Roman Empire, involving local auxiliaries rather than regular troops. Archæological information pointed to the house standing upon the route of a Roman road serving the garrison of 'Eboracum', as York was known before the Vikings. Even more remarkably, later archæological finds indicated they were equipped with round shields. These facts, along with Martindale's authoritative presence, brought a reassuring plausibility to the whole sighting.

Martindale was the type of ghost witness who typically dissolves all doubts in the mind of the ghost-inclined researcher. His demeanour was of a straightforward, unflappable, no-nonsense Yorkshireman, not given to fanciful imaginings. He impressed and convinced numerous listeners, writers and broadcasters over the years, from Ian Wilson (*In Search of Ghosts*, 1995) to Tom Vernon (*Fat Man on a Roman Road*, 1983). Such a solid and apparently unimaginative witness seemed to confer a measure of solidity upon such ethereal and insubstantial phantoms, condensing them into almost tangible form, fulfilling the deep desires of many who yearn for corporeal evidence of an incorporeal spirit realm.

The acute potency of Martindale's story put it at the heart of the successful ghost walking industry flourishing in York since the 1970s. As I wrote in 2008 [FT234:16], ghost walks, tours, lectures, "eerie evenings" and weekend breaks have become an established feature of the local tourist trade, with York promoted as "The most haunted city in England". The inspiration for this can be traced directly back to a special 'Ghost Hunting Weekend' held over 8–10 February 1974. This was an initiative by John Mitchell, supported by the Ghost Club.

Peter Underwood, then President of the Ghost Club, was justly proud of this role. To commence the first weekend, on 8 February 1974, he hosted a special "Talk and Discussion on Ghosts" at St William's College near York Minister within a room known as "the House of Laymen". Recalling this some nine years later in his book *No Common Task* (1983), Underwood reported his lecture proved not without incident, when the latch of a door to the hall was twice lifted by itself. Chris Martin, director of tourism for York, told the *Northern Echo*: "It was absolutely true that during the lecture I saw and heard a heavy latch on the door into the room open a couple of times. I thought



ABOVE: Harry Martindale returns to the cellars of the Treasurer's House to retell his story.





ANDREW HOWAT / LOOK AND LEARN

ABOVE: Ghostly Roman legionaries in an illustration from *Look and Learn* #737, 28 Feb 1976. BELOW: Ghost walks remain a mainstay of York's tourist trade.

it might be someone trying to get into the room, but when I opened it there was nothing there. It was most curious..."

It proved a good omen for the intrepid group, assembled from around the UK, Belgium, France and the USA, to set off the next morning, accompanied by Mitchell and Martin to explore haunted sites around York. Refreshed by coffee and lunch, they then boarded a coach into the Yorkshire Dales for Bolton Abbey ("Black-cowled Augustinian Canons have been seen") and Fountains Hall (haunted by "a blue lady").

Returning to York at 6pm, there followed a 15-minute reconnoitre of the Cock & Bottle Inn ("supposedly haunted by the 17th century Duke of Buckingham") ahead of a ghost hunt scheduled for later that night. Before this, they fortified themselves with a "Yorkshire Neet Banquet", a mediæval-themed feast of Yorkshire food and drink at the Viking Hotel between 8pm and 11pm, and were entertained by a costumed folk-singer. Duly primed by the disembodied, they returned to face the disembodied after closing time, waiting up until past midnight at the Cock & Bottle for the shade of the Duke of Buckingham and listening out for "strange noises" heard by the landlord and his wife. Sunday morning saw forays to "various haunted settings" before sherry and luncheon at the Windmill Restaurant followed by another walking tour by Mitchell to several more sites. At the end, attendees were presented with a special kit of brochures and sketches as souvenirs.

Hopes that people would enjoy themselves were more than realised. Participants were enthused, being filmed at various stages by the BBC *Nationwide*

## Martindale was in all respects perfect for convincing audiences who wanted to believe

programme. "I've thoroughly enjoyed it," said the youngest of the party, 12-year-old Alistair Johnson of Edinburgh. "This was better than school any day. Even if I did see something I don't think I would be too frightened". Several people reported feeling "something not of this world". Having proven there was interest, weekend breaks and shorter tours all followed, evolving into the regular walking tours of today.

Amid all of this, the Roman soldiers



haunting the Treasurer's House remained the centrepiece and story *par excellence* on the tours. In later years Martindale led walks himself when off-duty. Like so many others over the years, as part of an awed audience, I heard his unique experience direct from him on one such walk, on an overcast but unforgettable evening in early October 1981. Numerous listeners, writers and broadcasters were captivated and convinced over the years, as was I.

Doubtless a most impressive police witness in a court room, his credibility was boosted by the unspoken assumption that being a police officer he was better equipped than average members of the public in making detailed observations and gathering evidence tested in judicial proceedings. As I said, Martindale was in all respects perfect for convincing audiences who already wanted to believe.

Since the mid-1980s I have had much work in courts and tribunals, seen many hundreds of people testifying to disputed facts under oath and have interviewed many more people, either working as a lawyer or as a psychical researcher. On balance, and watching filmed interviews with him subsequently, I feel that Martindale was recounting an experience he believed he had undergone. It is therefore with a certain guilt, almost a feeling of heresy, that I point out certain weaknesses in uncritically accepting such testimony.

His story of seeing Romans is weak in corroboration. Save for a sighting at the Treasurer's House claimed in 1957 (but not reported until many years later), other claimed sightings all appear to be second- or third-hand; and to my knowledge no





# GHOSTWATCH

independent records have emerged of any other sightings published prior to 1974.

One man who reported hearing Martindale's story before 1974 was the Lord Mayor of York, Councillor Ian Gillies, who had worked alongside him at the police in Acomb; members of the Martindale family also vouched for his experience being genuine. (*The Press*, 25 Oct 2015). But simply to repeat a story is not to corroborate it, "otherwise it is only necessary... to repeat [a] story some 25 times in order to get 25 corroborations of it". (*R v Whitehead* [1925] 1 KB 99).

One possibility is that Martindale suffered a hallucination in the cellar, after falling from the ladder in a state of automatism. Another is that he had told the story so many times that he convinced himself (appearing like Alex Campbell, the water bailiff who claimed to have spotted the Loch Ness monster numerous times). Once in print, his story became part of him and he could not then bring himself to contradict it. However, a single witness is not necessarily to be disbelieved for want of corroboration, and no proof exists to support either of these suggestions.

Nor do I think his story was manufactured for the 1974 book and subsequent walks. From my experience of authors of local ghost books, such individuals earnestly labour for years, frequently for little material reward, collecting stories and experiences to produce their often personal and highly idiosyncratic works. Seldom do they knowingly resort to invention; they don't need to. Every locality in the British Isles, whether a teeming metropolitan district or sparsely populated countryside, is crammed with unrecorded experiences, stories and traditions awaiting a fascinated and dedicated scribe. The problem is an excess of material, not any lack.

Undoubtedly, a factor encouraging uncritical acceptance of Martindale's account by many researchers is its appeal for those who adopt alternatives to the unquiet spirit theory of ghosts (why would 20 spirits march continuously through a cellar, for a millennium and half?). For many researchers its attractions lie in the anecdotal detail of the figures being partly cut off by the floor. This seems consistent with two favourite notions as to the origins of hauntings, the so-called 'stone-tape' or 'recording' theory and also the 'time-slip' hypothesis of ghosts. A detail of a figure being cut off at knee level may be accounted for by the rise in the ground level by around 15in (38cm) over the centuries. Martindale initially viewed his three-dimensional apparitions from above, astride a ladder positioned in the mid-20th century, a viewpoint only possible from a structure erected over 1,000 years



ABOVE: The Treasurer's House, York, scene of Harry Martindale's ghostly 1953 encounter.

after the time of origin. It is suggestive of a replaying of a scene from nearly 2,000 years earlier, but framed and perceived with a material screen provided by the fabric of the more recent historical environment.

The problem with these theories as science is that neither is testable, since both lack any identified basis for the postulated mechanisms involved. Inherent with both are the questions of precisely where and how such holographic images are being stored. Why would only the figures be transmitted across the centuries, not their surroundings as well?

Assessing such experiences is made difficult by lack of comparable cases. The majority of apparitions reported are human forms but involve individual figures, not groups and complex replays. Ghosts identified as Roman are especially rare, and despite the publicity attached to Martindale's story there has been no flood of similar experiences, re-enforcing its exceptional and aberrant character. Personally, I have only obtained two such reports, one from a gentleman who contacted me and the second from a lady writer whom I traced after finding a reference to her sighting in a locally published ghost book. Both were nowhere near either York or Hadrian's Wall.

In 2001, I was telephoned by a Cambridgeshire man who told of seeing a dozen or so ghosts of Roman soldiers on a hillock near Orwell, Cambridgeshire. His story was that back in 1985 he had been driving past the hillside when his attention was caught by a dozen or so Roman legionaries, spread out in a line walking down towards the road. They appeared completely life-like, and his immediate reaction was that he was seeing costumed actors participating in film-making. He looked towards the road ahead and then back to the hillside only to


now see it devoid of any figures. Two weeks later he was travelling the same route and saw the same figures. He told me he remained intrigued by his experiences and that periodically he travelled along the same stretch of road, as much as once a fortnight, hoping to glimpse them again – but never had. "They looked as though they were simply ambling along, as though they were on their way to a brew up" (not that Romans drank tea).

Of course, I asked him a selection of the usual questions that one typically puts to witnesses who identify ghosts as Roman (such as "Do you like movies about gladiators?", "Do you know any Latin?", "Have you studied Roman history?" etc). But it was his comments about films and tea that made it clear he was viewing his experience through a prism of modern cultural conceptions. And this seemed particularly pertinent, coming not long after the film *Gladiator* (2000) had been released. Could the experience of seeing ghostly Roman legionaries be shaped by their depiction in cinema?

Could ghostly legionaries be a product of some kind of social hallucination? This is an interesting question that I owe to discussions with Tony Percy, a psychical researcher who worked with the late Tony Cornell (1923-2010) of the Cambridge University and UK Societies for Psychical Research, and folklore expert Jeremy Harte. Independently, both advance the idea that social and cultural elements, particularly images drawn from cinema and media, are aiding and abetting the creation of experiences of Roman soldiers in York and other places. Drinking my own pint of 'Centurion's Ghost' beer, and recalling St Paul's advice in his *Letter to the Romans* (12, 3) "to think soberly", I think the time has come to consider this possibility in more depth. *To be continued...*



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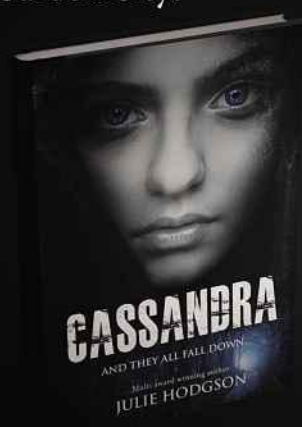
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 by Julie Hodgson, Cassandra Jones has violently beaten Braydon Taylor, a six-year-old. But that was 10 years ago. Now Dr. Sommer has taken her off her meds. As a 16-year-old, Cass enjoys hanging out at iCandy, an ice cream joint, with her best friends, Bindi and Leo. She attends Garden City High and loves learning Shakespearean plays from the handsome Mr. Mac. She's also in love with the town's newest resident: Braydon Taylor. But when she's alone, Cass battles incessant hand itching and hallucinations of creepy tentacles wiggling out of her skin. A compulsive need to run to remote locales places her at the center of an epidemic of dead teenagers being found at Jenson's Park. Will her alibi clear her of any wrongdoing or is there a serial killer loose in Garden City?



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## A WALK ON THE WILD SIDE

Domestic animals turn wild, and vice versa, while others escape and go walkabout...



ADAM ZBYRYT / FACEBOOK

ABOVE: The Limousin escapee with her wild and woolly new friends. BELOW: A motley crew of sheep and goats follow their donkey leader through suburban West Covina.

### BACK TO NATURE

A cow ran away from a Polish farm in late October to spend the winter living with a herd of some 50 wild bison in a primæval forest on the Belarusian border, despite the temperatures dropping to 14°F (minus 10°C).

Ornithologist Adam Zbyryt was the first to spot the cow in November, keeping strange company. "It's not unusual to see bison near the Białowieża Forest, but one animal caught my eye," he said. "It was a completely different light-brown shade from the rest of the herd. Bison are chestnut or dark brown". He dropped his initial idea that this was a mutation when he trained his binoculars on the creature, and saw that it was Limousin cow – a French breed popular in Poland. Biologist Rafal Kowalczyk spotted the animal again in late January, still apparently healthy and keeping pace with the herd. He said that the herd had probably saved her from the wolves that prowl the edges of the forest through the winter. Bison became extinct in Europe in the early 20th century due to hunting, and

it was only in the Fifties that conservation programmes began to reintroduce the continent's largest land animal back into its natural environment. *BBC News*, 24 Jan; *D.Telegraph*, 26 Jan 2018.

### HERD MENTALITY

If domestic animals can choose to return to the wild, then it would seem, by the same token, that a wild animal can opt for domestication. In December 2015 a wild boar became something of a

celebrity in Germany after joining a herd of cows on a farm near Neumünster, Schleswig-Holstein. Doctor and farmer Dirk Reese watched the persistent porcine pretender – whom he christened Banana – inveigle himself into the herd of cattle. Two months later, the young boar seemed happy with his bovine companions, while the cows appeared to accept the new addition to the herd. "He's fully integrated. It's fascinating," said Mr Reese.

Lori Marino, of the Kimmela Center for Animal Advocacy, explained that pigs, both wild and domestic, are socially complex creatures with a need for stimulation if they are to "blossom". It's unclear why Banana left the forest to seek out a new life – possibly he was an orphan – but clearly the animal "latched on to whomever it could find," she said. "Pigs are smart; this one knew what it was doing... It's a cute little mistake, but it also







MARKUS SCHOLZ / AFP / GETTY IMAGES



shows how socially flexible these animals are. Everyone is getting something out of the relationship.” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*; [www.thelocal.de/news.nationalgeographic.com](http://www.thelocal.de/news.nationalgeographic.com), 7 Dec 2015.

## GOATS LED BY DONKEYS

A donkey led more than a dozen sheep and goats on a

stroll through a suburban West Covina neighbourhood east of Los Angeles on 25 January. The animals escaped their owners’ property in neighbouring Valinda through an unsecured gate and were finally corralled with the help of the County Sheriff’s Department. The owner was contacted and took the herd home. [AP] 26 Jan 2018.

## SHOW-OFF SHEEPDOG

Rosalyn Edwards was working in her kitchen on 25 October 2017 when she heard strange noises. Turning around, she was stunned to discover her Border collie puppy, Rocky, had led nine sheep indoors. The seven-month-old sheepdog-in-training had ushered the woolly rabble into the Devon farmhouse via the back door. “I

thought it was funny at the time, but then there was quite a lot of wee, poo and mud everywhere,” said Mrs Edwards, 40. “It took me a little while to clean it all up. My son and husband had gone out into the field, and the gate was left open. Rocky got them out and led them to the house. I was in the kitchen and heard a noise. I turned around and the sheep were just standing there. I took the children into another room and then tried to guide the sheep out.” Eventually the flock was marched out via the front porch, leaving a trail of muck in their wake. Mrs Edwards added: “Rocky did look quite pleased with himself, but he’s going to need more training. He brought a whole new meaning to ‘bringing the sheep home’.” *D.Telegraph*, *D.Mirror*, 4 Nov 2017.

## BABOONS BREAK OUT

Paris Zoological Park went into lockdown on 26 January after 52 baboons escaped from their enclosures. The animals got free around midday at the 36-acre park in the city’s Vincennes woods. Most were rounded up, but four were still at large a day later. *D.Express*, 27 Jan 2018.



MARKUS SCHOLZ / AFP / GETTY IMAGES

TOP AND ABOVE: Banana the wild boar piglet and his adoptive family down on the farm in Schleswig-Holstein.





### KARL SHUKER bids farewell to a crypto-legend and solves the mystery of a 'weird' African bird

#### FAREWELL, JC JOHNSON

On 3 February 2018, the international cryptozoological community lost another major figure with the passing of celebrated bigfoot field researcher Jc Johnson as a result of double pneumonia. Born in Arizona but based in Minnesota since mid-2017, as a professional outdoors guide of more than 20 years' standing Jc's knowledge of the wilds and also of bigfoot lore was legendary, and he was always much sought after, both by other bigfoot researchers and the mass media, for his unrivalled field skills and experience; and not just in relation to bigfoot. Indeed, he was fondly nicknamed the Indiana Jones of cryptozoology, because as CEO, President, and founder of Crypto Four Corners, he led numerous teams of researchers on field investigations into a wide range of mystery beasts reputedly inhabiting the remote Four Corners wilderness region of Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico, and Utah, including alleged man-beasts, pterodactyls, giant snakes, skin-walkers, dogmen, and much more.

Jc and I never met, but he was one of my very first Facebook friends, right back at the beginning of my apprehensive entry onto the social media stage a decade ago, and he always took a great interest in my own researches and writings, just as I did in his. Our deepest sympathy and sincerest condolences here at FT go to all of Jc's many other friends and cryptozoological colleagues but above all to his family.

[www.cryptozonews.com/johnson-jc-obit/](http://www.cryptozonews.com/johnson-jc-obit/)  
3 Feb 2018.



ABOVE LEFT: The 'weird' bird shot dead and paraded through the Nigerian town of Ogbomoshosho.

ABOVE RIGHT: The marabou stork; why would a familiar Nigerian bird have caused confusion?



#### LOSING YOUR HEAD OVER A STORK...

During late January 2018, a decidedly odd report originating in a Ghanaian online news site called *Pulse* was circulated widely throughout the major social media sites and elsewhere online. It concerned a reportedly "weird" bird shot dead on 26 January 2018 by some youths in the Nigerian town of Ogbomoshosho, in Oyo State, and then paraded through the streets, held by one of the youths high above his head. The report, which claimed that this incident had "caused confusion among community members", contained two colour photographs of the dead bird, which for once were actually both in focus and in close-up – a double rarity for cryptozoological images! Unfortunately, they were still of little use in identifying its species because of the bizarre angles at which they had been snapped, yielding a pair of very large, partly outstretched black-plumed wings but seemingly no legs or head.

In the accompanying text, the bird was described as "weird" and as "a scary looking bird with features like a vulture", and when I first looked at the photos I did wonder if it was indeed a species of vulture, of which seven exist in this large West African country, but none of them seemed to match the killed bird. If only its head were visible.

Browsing online, I found additional reports from various other West African sources, plus a third photograph of the bird's hoisted-aloft carcass, but once again the angle at which it had been taken was such that all of the bird's vital features for identification purposes were

obscured, and I even began to wonder if its head had been chopped off. However, after choosing what appeared to be the most detailed of the three photos and both enlarging and enhancing it considerably, I was finally able to discern the head and base of the beak, which revealed unequivocally that the mystery bird was a marabou stork *Leptoptilos crumenifer*. The bare head and neck of this species are certainly superficially vulturine, which explained why it had been described as such in the *Pulse* report, and its wingspan can be 7-9ft (2.1-2.7m) across, but what remains unexplained is why, at least according to the various reports, this bird had caused confusion (and apparently even chaos) among the locals and had been deemed weird – bearing in mind that the marabou is both a common and a very familiar species in Nigeria and elsewhere in West Africa. Equally odd is a mention in the *Pulse* report of an earlier killing of another supposed mystery beast, this time in Sapele, in Nigeria's Delta State, yet whose photograph revealed it at once to be a West African manatee *Trichechus senegalensis*, yet again a very familiar species in this region of Africa. Careless reporting, cunning click-bait, or cryptozoological fake news? I'll let you decide!

[www.pulse.com.gh/filla/scary-looking-bird-killed-in-ogbomoshosho-id7907902.html?utm\\_source=facebook&utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_campaign=pulse-ghana\\_web](http://www.pulse.com.gh/filla/scary-looking-bird-killed-in-ogbomoshosho-id7907902.html?utm_source=facebook&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=pulse-ghana_web), 29 Jan 2018; [www.akpraise.ng/chaos-in-ogbomoshosho-oyo-state-after-a-large-bird-was-shot-dead-by-some-youths/](http://www.akpraise.ng/chaos-in-ogbomoshosho-oyo-state-after-a-large-bird-was-shot-dead-by-some-youths/), 29 Jan 2018.

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# PORTRAIT OF A LADY

A remarkable painting of hirsute Bavarian prodigy Barbara van Beck has made its way to London



ABOVE LEFT: The newly acquired portrait of Barbara van Beck. ABOVE RIGHT: Barbara in an etching made by Richard Gaywood in London, 1656.

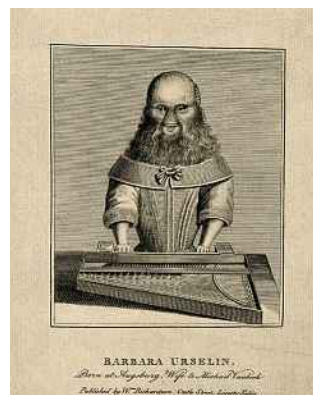
On 15 September 1657 the diarist John Evelyn had a conversation with an intelligent, cultured German woman, dressed in the height of fashion, who played beautifully to him on the harpsichord. She also had “a most prolix beard & moustachios, with long locks of haire growing on the very middle of her nose, exactly like an Iceland Dog [a fashionable shaggy lap dog of the day].... Her very Eyebrowes were combed upwards & all her forehead as thick & even as growes on any woman’s head, neatly dress’d. There come also two locks very long out of each Eare.”

The Wellcome Collection in London has acquired a remarkable portrait painted a few years before their meeting, which shows Barbara van Beck exactly as Evelyn described her:

composed, dignified, wearing a beautiful and expensive low-cut grey silk dress, with a lace collar tied with a scarlet bow, and more ribbons in her hair which was, Evelyn wrote, “light browne & fine as well dressed flax”. Evelyn had been dragged in by friends to see a Turkish tightrope walker, and was surprised to meet Barbara, whom he described as “the Hairy Maid, or Woman”. He had met her 20 years earlier when she was only eight, but already being exhibited by her parents.

“We don’t know who painted the portrait, or where, when or for whom – but the point of it is Barbara’s dignity,” said Angela McShane, Wellcome’s research development manager. “This is a beautifully executed high-status painting. She is not portrayed as a freak as the Victorians would have described her – as

*“We don’t know who painted the portrait, or where, or when, or for whom...”*



I often say when lecturing, you can blame the Victorians for most things – but as a woman with great self-possession and presence, painted at a time when she would have been viewed, as Evelyn saw her, as wonderful, a natural wonder. There is nothing titillating about her low-cut dress either, though we might now see it that way. She is dressed in the highest fashion of the day and contemporary viewers would have recognised that... There is no reason why she wouldn’t have had a normal lifespan. If you survived to 10 years old, you were highly likely to make it to 60. There must be more records of her out there somewhere.”

She was born Barbara Ursler (or Urslerin) in 1629 near Augsburg in Bavaria, one of several children but the only one with the condition.



## 221: LEARNING TO TALK FOREIGN



### The myth

It is easier, and faster, to learn a foreign language when you are a child than when you are grown-up.

### The “truth”

This widely accepted piece of common sense folk knowledge has been tested by many researchers in many settings, and always found to be untrue. Not only is there no evidence that children learn languages faster than adults, but there's quite a bit to suggest that it's adults who have the advantage. Adults understand the processes of learning better and have developed memory techniques. They look for patterns when learning a language, and apply them, and have much more experience in doing so than children. Some studies even show that children who start learning a second language at secondary school do better than those who start at primary school. One reason for the endurance of the myth is perhaps that success is judged differently in adults and children; kids use simpler sentences and a smaller vocabulary than adults do. For a grown-up to be considered proficient in a second tongue, she'll be expected to demonstrate a more sophisticated and complete command of it.

### Sources

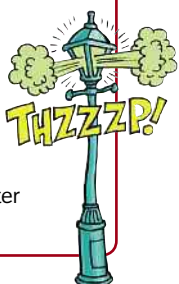
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### Disclaimer

Je ne habén el expertise of any sort in this subject, so if you have corrections or objections to make to any of the above please translate them carefully into Volapuk and send them to FT.

### Mythchaser

In the 19th century, an FT reader has always understood, Londoners used to get rid of sewer gas by burning it in special street lamps. But now she's been told that sewer lamps never ran on sewer gas. Confused, and possibly a little nauseous, she asks if any students of Victoriana who happen to be wafting past this column might settle the matter for her.



*The Effigies of Barbara the Wife of John Michael, taken in the 27<sup>th</sup> Year of her Age. The was of Daughter of Balthazar & Anne Ueber. Born at Lustburg in upper Germany in 4 Year 1629.*  
*Vera Effigies Barbarae Uxoris Johannis Michael, Natæ Augustæ vnderhonorari in Germania superioris vulgo Lustburg & Parentibus Balthazare & Anna Ueber Anno Chr. 1629. Aetatis 27.*

ABOVE: Barbara in an undated mezzotint. BELOW: A stipple engraving by G. Scott, which would seem to derive from the same source. FACING PAGE BOTTOM: An etching by RS Kirby of 1813 showing Barbara at the keyboard.



Her parents exhibited her in travelling shows, but she clearly also acquired an education and could speak several languages. The anatomist Thomas Bartolin saw her in Copenhagen in 1639. She married a German called Johann Michael von Beck, who became her manager. She told Evelyn she had “one child that was not hairy, nor were any of her parents or relations”. The last known reference

to the hirsute prodigy is in 1668, when the Dane Holger Jacobsen encountered her in London.

The Wellcome Collection, which already has five prints of the same woman, has identified the condition as a very rare congenital endocrine condition known as hypertrichosis or Ambras Syndrome. It was named for Ambras castle in Innsbruck, where Ferdinand II, the Archduke of Austria, had created a famous cabinet of curiosities – still open to the public – which included portraits of people with unusual medical conditions such as hirsutism (see “The Old Curiosity Schloss” by Mike Jay, FT87:23-25). The portrait of Van Beck is of such high quality that McShane wonders if it could have been in the collection at some point after Ferdinand's death.

For more on Barbara van Beck and other hirsute wonders, see “Hairy Tales” by Jan Bondeson, FT209:46-51. Guardian, 14 Dec 2017.



## MEDICAL BAG

This month: The Italian family who feel no pain, the girl who smells colours and an alarming example of the perils of plastic packaging...



LETIZIA MARSILI

ABOVE: Letizia Marsili (centre) and family are being studied by researchers hoping to learn how their mutation works.

### THAT DIDN'T HURT

An entire Italian family suffer from a strange genetic mutation that makes them almost completely immune to pain. The condition is so rare that scientists have named it 'The Marsili Syndrome', after the family. Letizia Marsili, 52, became aware of her immunity to pain in early childhood when she didn't experience any particular sensation from burns or fractures. Five other members of her family, spanning at least three generations, also share this rare genetic anomaly. "From day to day we live a very normal life, perhaps better than the rest of the population, because we very rarely get unwell and we hardly feel any pain," said Letizia. "However, in truth, we do feel pain, the perception of pain, but this only lasts for a few seconds." While the mutation might seem to function like a superpower, it can also be dangerous. Since the Marsilis only feel pain for a few seconds, they often leave injuries untreated.

Letizia once fractured her right shoulder while skiing, but continued to ski all afternoon.

She only went to hospital the next morning because her fingers were tingling. Her sister Maria Elena often damages the top of her mouth, because she burns herself with hot drinks. Letizia's 24-year-old son Ludovico, who plays football, often gets injured, but just keeps on going, regardless how serious the injury. "He recently received X-rays of the joints, which showed that he has many microcracks in the ankle," said Letizia. Her youngest son, 21-year-old Bernardo, fractured his elbow joint after falling from a bicycle, but he didn't even notice. After the fall, he simply got up and cycled a further 14km (9 miles) as if nothing had happened. Doctors only discovered the trauma when his bone began to heal. The Marsilis have become the focus of researchers hoping to discover how their mutation works, and so develop new ways of pain management. After genetic mapping the family, James Cox of University College London and his colleagues isolated the variant shared by the Marsilis – a gene called ZFHX2. They then conducted two tests on mice and deter-

mined that the mice that were grown with a similar genetic mutation were also oblivious to pain. *oddtitycentral.com*, 21 Dec 2017.

### SMELLING COLOURS

Last year, Deepti Regmi, an 11-year-old girl from Nepal, spontaneously developed the ability to smell colours, an unusual variant of synaesthesia. She is also allegedly able to read newsprint by feeling it. Deepti, who believes her ability is a gift from God, has been training to sharpen her sense of smell, hoping eventually to use it to help the visually impaired. Footage shot by Puskar Nepal shows her identifying colours while blindfolded by sniffing various objects.

According to the American Psychological Association, around one in 2,000 people globally are affected by synaesthesia, the cause of which is currently unknown. There does appear to be a genetic factor in some cases, but the condition often occurs completely spontaneously as well. Synaesthetes are predominately female. They are said to be eight times

more likely to work in creative fields, and musicians with synaesthesia are particularly common. Mary J Blige, Frank Ocean, Tori Amos, Billy Joel, and Pharell Williams have all been diagnosed with the condition. Famous synaesthetes include Vladimir Nabokov, Vincent Van Gogh and Duke Ellington. *Storytrender*, via *Caters News Agency* and *oddtitycentral.com*, 26 Oct 2017.

### REPRIEVE FOR RATS

Rats and their fleas were once thought to have spread a series of plague outbreaks in 14th-19th century Europe, but a team from the universities of Oslo and Ferrara now says the major pandemic known as the Black Death can be largely ascribed to human ectoparasites (fleas and body lice). The study, in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science*, analysed records of the plague's pattern and scale. The Black Death claimed an estimated 25 million lives, more than a third of Europe's population, between 1347 and 1351. "We have good mortality data from outbreaks in nine cities in Europe," said Prof Nils Stenseth, from the University of Oslo, "so we could construct models of the disease dynamics [there]."

Prof Stenseth and his colleagues then simulated disease outbreaks in each of these cities, creating three models where the disease was spread either by rats, airborne transmission, or fleas and lice that live on humans and their clothes. In seven out of the nine cities studied, the "human parasite model" was the best match for the pattern of the outbreak. It mirrored how quickly it spread and how many people it affected. "The conclusion was very clear," said Prof Stenseth. "The lice model fits best. It would be unlikely to



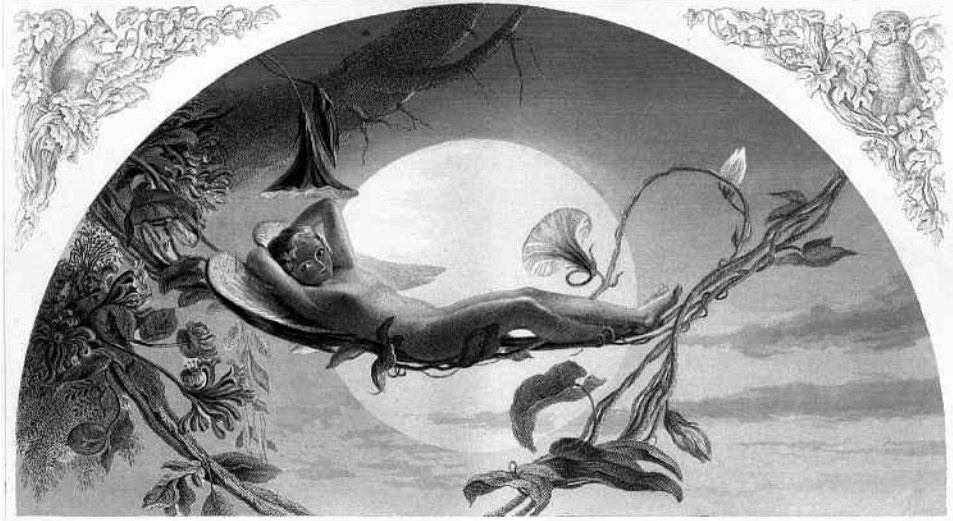


spread as fast as it did if it was transmitted by rats. It would have to go through this extra loop of the rats, rather than being spread from person to person.”

Plague is still endemic in some countries of Asia, Africa and the Americas, where it persists in “reservoirs” of infected rodents [see FT361:11]. According to the World Health Organization, from 2010 to 2015 there were 3,248 cases reported worldwide, including 584 deaths. In 2001, a study that decoded the plague genome used a bacterium that had come from a vet in the US who had died in 1992 after a plague-infested cat sneezed on him as he had been trying to rescue it from underneath a house. *BBC News*, 15 Jan; *D.Mail*, 16 Jan; *Sun*, 17 Jan 2018.

## DANGERS OF KETCHUP

For six years, an unnamed 41-year-old woman suffered bouts of acute abdominal pain and bloating lasting up to three days – prompting doctors to diagnose Crohn’s disease, which affects at least 115,000 people in the UK and millions more worldwide. The exact cause is unclear, but it is thought to be a combination of genetic and environmental triggers. There’s currently no cure but treatment can help to relieve symptoms. When the woman failed to respond to standard medication, doctors at Heatherwood and Wexham Park Hospital in Slough decided to operate. Keyhole surgery found an inflamed mass in the small intestine, revealing two pieces of plastic packaging bearing the Heinz logo, apparently from a sachet of ketchup, piercing her intestine. She had no memory of consuming a meal involving the sachet. Once removed, her symptoms were cured almost immediately. Doctors writing in the *British Medical Journal* said it was the first reported case of ingested plastic packaging mimicking the symptoms of Crohn’s disease. *dailymail.co.uk*, 3 Jan 2018.



## FAIRIES, FOLKLORE AND FORTEANA

SIMON YOUNG FILES A NEW REPORT FROM THE INTERFACE OF STRANGE PHENOMENA AND FOLK BELIEF

### MODELLING SHARED VISIONS

I’ve had the great pleasure of reading, during a bout of flu, Eugene Hynes’s study of the Marian apparition at Knock in 1879 in County Mayo, Ireland (*Knock: The Virgin’s Apparition in Nineteenth-Century Ireland*, Cork University Press, 2008).

The apparition was a remarkable supernatural event. Many men, women and children saw, for several hours, three luminous figures standing in the sky near the village’s church gable. These figures were static and did not speak. One witness, interestingly, saw the light, though not the figures, from his farm window a mile away. Hynes’s book is not principally about the apparition; rather, it inserts the apparition into changes in Irish Catholicism and rural life in the mid-to-late 19th century – Hynes is a sociologist. However, there is a magnificent chapter on the vision itself, one of the finest forensic dissections of a collective supernatural experience that I have ever read.

Hynes breaks down the recording of the experience into five parts, making the fundamental point that the experience and what we eventually read about in the press are two very different things. This is a model that could usefully be applied to other fortean group experiences, from ghosts to UFOs. First, there is the *vision*, where Hynes has very little to say: what can a social scientist do with the impossible? Second, *sources*. Hynes notes that

some of the viewers were influenced in the vision by religious images seen earlier in their lives: one boy, for instance, compared the vision to images he had seen in Catholic school books. Third, *witness editing*. The seers, individually and in groups, subsequently edited what they had seen in an attempt to make sense of it. Freud noted a similar process for dreams and called it ‘secondary elaboration’. Above all, we

remove bits that don’t make sense. Fourth, *recorder editing*. The details of the vision were taken down by Church officials who had their own agenda. One of the three luminous figures went from being an anonymous bishop to St John the Evangelist! Fifth, *additions*. Church officials talked to a number of seers and several had marginal details that no one else had noticed and these were added to the mix. The result at Knock was that a lamb, an altar and a cross appeared, though

most witnesses had not seen them.

Put any experience through this sausage machine and there is the potential for massive distortion. As to the vision itself, the only ‘natural explanation’ is that someone in the locality had decided to put on a magic lantern show. Hynes, rightly, has little patience with this – but nor does he give any satisfying explanation for how anything between a dozen and two dozen witnesses were collectively plunged into the Twilight Zone for several hours...

Simon Young writes on folklore and history and runs [www.fairyist.com](http://www.fairyist.com)

ONE OF THE  
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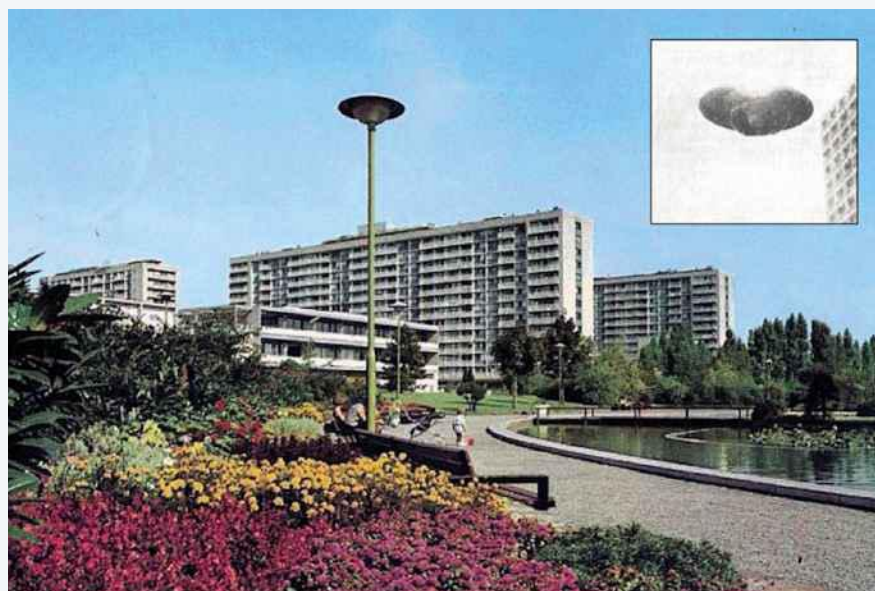
## Draining the swamp

PETER BROOKESMITH surveys the latest fads and flaps from the world of ufological research

Purveyors of UFO photographs can't win. Exhibit a blobby, out-of-focus thing, and the chorus will come: "It's a blobby, out-of-focus thing! Did you dip the cat in luminous paint and throw it in the air?" and similar expressions of disrespect. Produce a sharp, detailed image and the chorus chants: "Bah, obviously a fake. Only fakes are that sharp and detailed." There are, of course, sharp and *un*-detailed UFO photos, which a bit of experience of these things will tell you is what happens when someone's pasted something on to a window and shot the view of dreary suburbia without.

*Flying Saucer Review* was full of sophisticated 'analyses' of UFO snaps, which didn't mean much and definitely fell on the collective nose with Derek Simpson's wonderful Warminster hoax (see **FT331:40-47** and the *Magonia* website). Ironically it was Charles Bowen, then editor of *FSR*, who had remarked that "It is a well-known fact that UFO photographs are the least reliable evidence of the existence of the UFO phenomenon"; but that didn't stop him getting huffy about the Simpson experiment. The first really objective attempt to interrogate this kind of picture was Bill (Ground Saucer Watch) Spaulding's, in the early 1980s, which used computer imaging techniques borrowed from metal stress testing to boost photos in various ways, so revealing strings from which the 'UFOs' were dangling, and so on. Spaulding's kit didn't always get it right, but it was a start. Photoshop can do as much and more, these days. Years ago, I ran one of the UFO photos that GSW declared genuine – Sheriff Jim Strauch's – through Photoshop, and it showed quite clearly that the 'UFO' was the light from a shaded standard lamp, with reflections in the house window and all.

Now along comes Vicente-Juan Ballester Olmos and Wim van Utrecht with a report on 38 years' worth of UFO photos from Belgium: the not-so-snappily-titled *Belgium in UFO Photographs 1950–88*, which you can buy as hard copy for €40 from [www.upiar.com/index.cfm?artID=191](http://www.upiar.com/index.cfm?artID=191), or download for free from [www.academia.edu/35133835/BELGIUM\\_IN\\_UFO\\_PHOTOGRAPHS\\_Volume\\_1\\_1950-1988](http://www.academia.edu/35133835/BELGIUM_IN_UFO_PHOTOGRAPHS_Volume_1_1950-1988). They burrow about as deep as you can go into some 84 photographs, and find no indisputably anomalistic images. Seven of these (8.3 per cent) have insufficient information to evaluate definitively – but you can see the pictures and figure out for yourself whether they illustrate an 'inexplicable' phenomenon or not. Fully 25 cases (29.8 per cent) they



ABOVE: Liège, March 1975 (inset); and the scene as it is now, the UFO needing a pole to keep it aloft.

regard as hoaxes or, more bluntly, fakes. A fat proportion of these come from one indefatigable individual who, along with his hokey images, had a suitably exotic story to match each one – all of which the authors sedulously deconstruct with, to their credit, no more mockery than the occasional foray into mild irony. Some of the other hoaxes have a certain charm, as one might hope from those perpetrated by journalists: street lamps with their poles whited out, water towers whose supports are handily obscured by trees, saucers rephotographed from a French Louis de Funès movie and so on. The date 1 April has some bearing on these.

The authors are nothing if not scrupulous, meticulous and exhaustive in analysing the pictures they consider. Even having established from various angles and approaches that a photo is (to say the least) dubious – if one hadn't guessed at first glance – they carry on to nail the case down, sometimes going into the very grain of the film to show how it's been meddled with. They give us Google Earth images of sighting sites, to show where the Sun, Moon, and a 'UFO' were, comparative control photos, details of how to burn a weird image into a negative, and so on. One thing to which they don't draw particular attention but leave implicit is the variety of images purporting to be UFOs – all manner of shapes and effects jostle with the standard flying-saucer discs – and not many of those resemble the others presented here. Either we're being visited by

endless different marques of UFO, as some do say, or people creating dodgy pictures can't make up their minds what a 'true UFO' looks like. Although Adamski-ish images are surprisingly rare (in Belgium anyway).

On occasion, they bluntly ask questions that any True Believer should have thought of in the first place, but (it seems) rarely does. For example: "[O]ne may ask why someone would take pictures of an uninteresting part of the sky if nothing out of the ordinary was seen in that direction. The situation is even more bizarre if we know that a film was used that was developed specially for macro photography." Not unrelated is their equally blunt comment: "Next to the poor quality of the evidence, we also noted a striking lack of competence among the ufologists who evaluated and then promoted the Belgian UFO and flying saucer photos from the past... It is almost as if the investigators were convinced from the start that the scientific method would not supply any answers to what they personally felt was a mystery that surpasses human understanding." One might wonder what the word "almost" is doing in that sentence. But they are not unfair: "When casual, coinciding circumstances are linked together and serious misinterpretations are made, error builds upon error, generating spurious and often complex UFO sightings that appear unexplainable after superficial probing."

Overall, an extraordinary achievement; and indispensable for the impartial observer.



## UFOs can damage your health, part one

JENNY RANGLES uncovers troubling links between Rendlesham and the PC Godfrey close encounter

*The Rendlesham Incident* (Flying Disk Press, 2017) is an account of 37 years of research by astronomer Andrew Pike. It looks at a possibility I have long considered for this 1980 close encounter – that some kind of science experiment involving dangerous energy beams might have caused whatever was seen in that Suffolk forest by several US Airmen. This matches otherwise curious reports that sailors aboard Navy vessels off that coast were ordered below deck on the night before the events occurred.

Over-the-horizon radar research was carried out at Orford Ness – location of the lighthouse believed by many to have resolved this case – but those tests were over by 1980 (see my Rendlesham Genesis series, **FT336-339**). Nonetheless, I have long regarded it as significant that a former MoD UFO department head and the most senior MoD figure to ever write on this case took a similar stance to my own as to what might have happened. Ralph Noyes (obit **FT120:45**) had been involved with UFOs since the 1950s, when he was charged by the Air Ministry with investigating sightings during a NATO exercise (Operation Mainbrace) around RAF bases in Yorkshire and ships in the North Sea. He later oversaw the Ministry's UFO division, with access to evidence never made public because it was apparently 'lost' prior to the decision to start releasing UFO files in the 1990s. This included gun camera film taken from RAF jets chasing glowing energy balls in the sky. Noyes saw this footage on becoming department head (see **FT305:72**, **FT307:68-69**). He honoured his MoD obligations to secrecy about such matters until he chose to talk to me in 1983 about Rendlesham. He told me he was 'ashamed' there had been a cover-up and wanted to know why. Remarkably, over the next decade or so, he helped me in getting senior politicians to take the case seriously. We composed letters to MPs asking what the MoD knew about the case, and the powerful forces that seemed to be involved (given the physical effects on witnesses and electrical equipment in close proximity). We both wondered if these were the same things that those RAF jets were chasing in the now 'lost' gun camera footage?

Interest was shown by several government sources, including senior MoD officials, but Noyes was never happy with the circuitous replies from the upper echelons of Whitehall and chose to go further. He helped Brenda Butler, Dot Street and me to present to the UK media the live tape of the sightings by the deputy commander, Colonel Charles Halt. This took place at Ralph's London club, for the release of the paperback of our book *Sky Crash*. Then, he wrote a bizarre UFO novel

called *A Secret Property* – which is not about Rendlesham, apparently, though it is set at a base called Bentbridge, near a lighthouse on Blandfordness, and involves a commander called Colonel Hoyt. The book involves a secret energy beam that causes problems for the Russians in space and generates forces in the sky seen by locals near the woods, with all sorts of associated political intrigue resulting.

We now know – which we did not when *A Secret Property* came out 33 years ago – that the USSR was involved with Rendlesham. In 1982, letters were sent to UFO abductee and police officer Alan Godfrey via a Moscow science academy well before the case became known to the British public. The Russians were linking the policeman's own case (just four weeks earlier in 1980; see my series on the Godfrey incident in **FT325-328**) to Rendlesham, and these letters were intercepted and read by someone claiming to be from the MoD who then visited Alan Godfrey at his police station. Godfrey was made to sign the Official Secrets Act in specific reference to all of this and, most intriguingly, adding his involvement five months prior to his UFO encounter with the death of a man near the spot where he later had his sighting. That man – called Adamski, a name heavy with UFO overtones – had been found dead atop a coal heap in broad daylight with a burn mark on the back of his head and eyes staring skyward, interpreted by those present, including the ambulance crew, as a look of fear. There also was a reported UFO sighting in the area hours before the body was found.

Three separate inquest hearings were held in autumn 1980 and the coroner called it the most baffling case of his career. Alan Godfrey was first officer on scene and charged with interviewing the man's widow, who explained how her husband had gone to the corner shop to buy potatoes but was not seen again until found five days later, miles away, in a town he had never before visited. During his enquiries, PC Godfrey also found an eyewitness who proved that Adamski was already dead before arriving at the coal heap. Yet neither this critical witness (a fireman visiting the yard) nor Alan was ever called to give evidence at the inquest.

There are many theories about what happened to Adamski, and only coincidence and speculation connect it with UFOs. Yet why did the 'man from the ministry' – which is how he styled himself to PC Godfrey – demand silence over the Adamski death as well as Alan's later UFO encounter and the letters from Russia about Rendlesham?

Andrew Pike's new book adds much to the saga, as he was involved in a research project in the area when the Rendlesham case

occurred and heard about the sightings before most others did. Indeed, he was the very first person on the scene, interviewing locals around a week after the sightings and seems to be the source of the stories that Brenda, Dot and I heard from foresters and farmers about 'scientists' investigating the sightings just days after they happened. We had (wrongly it seems) argued in our book *Sky Crash* that only someone from the MoD could have known about the case so soon after it happened. Instead it was Andrew and a colleague, freelance investigating because they were in the area at the right time.

So what did they discover? And, more importantly, what does it tell us about the possible nature of the forces involved and how dangerous they really could be to those unfortunate enough to get in the way?

As my FT articles two years ago revealed, the area around Rendlesham Forest was rich in electronic technology. In 1980, when the Rendlesham Forest case took place, the USAF bases contained secret nuclear weapons, which the MoD was keen that the UK peace movement should not find out about (they were then protesting around bases such as Greenham Common, where USAF cruise missiles were stationed. It now seems that the MoD were deeply suspicious of three women – Brenda, Dot and I – pursuing a well-hidden UFO case and thought we might be part of the Women's Peace group under surveillance. Indeed, anonymous messages claiming we were acting with that group appeared in UFO magazines. I was never associated with that campaign and during the time I spent with Brenda and Dot saw no evidence that their interest extended beyond UFOs.

Yet further new evidence revealed by Alan Godfrey in his book about his Todmorden UFO encounter (*Who or What Were They?*, Ozfactorbooks, 2017) shows that the ministry appears to have planted a spy acting as a friendly UFO investigator seeking to report back what we knew from our internal discussions.

Intriguingly, this person was deeply involved in the Adamski death, the Godfrey abduction and Rendlesham forest cases: the same three that the MoD made Alan sign a secrecy order over. This would be an extraordinarily risky step for the powers that be to take with a UFO case. Why was such a strategy necessary. Was something going on of a covert nature known to the MoD? Why were Soviet scientists digging into these things as well? And what does this tell us about the possible nature of the energy involved and how dangerous it could be for those unfortunate enough to get in its way? Next month I will look into that question.



# BLASTS FROM THE PAST

.....  
FORTEAN TIMES BRINGS YOU THE NEWS THAT TIME FORGOT

## 72 TERROR DOWN BELOW

THEO PAIJMANS THEO PAIJMANS goes deep beneath the Earth in search of horrors and hauntings from mines



Mines have often suffered horrific disasters and many became haunted places. In 1901, an American engineer pointed out that of all elevator accidents each year very few resulted from the breaking of cables or brakes. The victims stepped into the shaft, thinking they saw the elevator car. This was plaguing the mining regions of Colorado. It began in one of the deep silver mines of Leadville. A miner had stepped into a shaft where there was no cage. Before he died, he told the doctor that he 'saw' the cage in the shaft. This started an epidemic of similar accidents in mines out West. "I have talked to old miners and they said they dread nothing more than the 'ghost of the cage'."<sup>1</sup>

Tales like this hindered the exploitation of American

Miners refused to work after "the figure of a woman bearing a lamp had been seen in the workings and the screams of a woman heard..."

mines, chemist and mining expert John Finn Jr pointed out in 1936. He had just returned from an investigation of 30 mines in the Western states and had found that each one had a ghost legend.<sup>2</sup>

Other mine disasters gave birth to new tales. When a terrible explosion took 200 lives in the Winter Quarter Mine in Utah in 1899, miners soon concluded that it was haunted. Strange and unusual noises were heard at times; others had seen a headless man walking about, and even

climbing into a coal car and riding with the driver to the mouth of the tunnel – where he disappeared. Mysterious lights were seen in the graveyard where many victims of the explosion were buried. "These lights are always followed by a death..."<sup>3</sup>

In 1889, a mine near Barnesville, Ohio, was plagued by the sudden appearance of a 'dazzling star'. "The other day two of the miners were out in the main entry of the mine... when a bright ball of fire, in the shape of a star, suddenly

appeared before them. In a moment the star became intensely brilliant and fairly dazzled their eyes. Now it swayed back and forth, up and down, with great rapidity." The star-like light played hide-and-seek, going inside the mine for a distance of about 300 yards, to disappear and suddenly reappear behind the startled miners. This went on for some time. When a cave-in followed, the light was seen as an omen.<sup>4</sup>

When disaster struck the Courrières mine in France in 1906, a journalist from the *Petit Parisien* investigated miners' lives and their stories. He found that although the miners in the Loire basin were the least superstitious, they still believed that there were places in the mine they were forbidden to enter, "based on a compact with the Earth".

The reporter was also told about sudden appearances of victims of earlier disasters and of mysterious hammering sounds emerging from deserted galleries. It was remembered that Emile Zola already recorded, in his novel *Germinale*, the belief held by many miners in the Northern basin in a 'black man', a mysterious inhabitant of the mine, and of how every explosion was announced by strange portents; white bats would suddenly appear or white specks would fill the air.<sup>5</sup>

Miners also often complained of hearing unusual sounds. In 1871, miners working in the pit at Cwmnantddu colliery at Abersychan, near Pontypool, Wales, had become so terrified by subterranean noises and stories of extraordinary 'sights' that the mining company was forced to conduct an inquiry: natural causes, it concluded, and the doings of a prankster, a man named John Harvey, who was brought before court.<sup>6</sup>

In 1890, the newspapers mentioned a remarkable story in connection with an explosion at the Morfa colliery in Wales that killed 87 people. Weeks before the disaster, there was talk among the miners of inexplicable noises and shouts, "spirits and noises and slamming of doors". Miners returning to the surface told of being accompanied by an invisible presence. Such was the atmosphere of supernatural fear and foreboding that a number of miners were said to have stayed away from work in the days before the explosion.<sup>7</sup> Twelve years later, some 300 miners refused to work at Glyncorrwg colliery near Port Talbot in Wales, because "the figure of a woman bearing a lighted lamp had been seen in the workings and the screams of a woman heard".<sup>8</sup>

The weird sounds in the Refugio mine in the Cluspa mountains, 60 miles southwest

of Alpine, Texas, may hold the record. A hundred feet (30m) down in the mine, Henry Body reported that "a noise like the bursting of a thousand cannons sounded in my ears and was followed by the most terrific rush of air... I was lifted from my feet and thrown against the rock walls of the shaft with such force that I was badly bruised and almost knocked senseless..." When he dug a new shaft, it delivered the same results: "The noises became so pronounced that the workmen refused to go on with it, and the whole project was abandoned". Entering the old shaft, all was quiet at first. Then "the phenomena suddenly broke forth in all their fury". The men were hurled with great force several feet and thrown repeatedly against the rock walls of the shaft. They reached the surface bruised and with their clothing torn. Boyd gave up, describing the mine as "an inferno occupied by hellish spirits".<sup>9</sup>

A year later, strange poltergeist effects began to plague a mine in Sonoma, California. When one man went down the shaft he suddenly felt he was not alone. "He turned around and for a moment as he peered into the darkness, lessened only by his miner's lamp, he could see nothing; but gradually his eyes beheld a man of enormous stature." Eventually, the mine was abandoned.<sup>10</sup> Sometimes the appearances were more gruesome. In 1887 a "bent, crushed figure" was seen deep in the bowels of the Brazil mine in Indiana, shambling "amidst the subterranean chambers".<sup>11</sup>

Similar anomalies were often seen as portents of doom. An old miner, for instance, refused to work because he had heard "the measured tolling of the church bell" deep down in the mine: "He was laughed at, but persisted in going home, and

subsequent events proved his good fortune in so doing, for before night the entire gallery caved in..."<sup>12</sup>

Vengeful spirits haunted the pits as well. In an old mine, a miner had met his death under a heavy fall of earth while his companion remained unhurt. One day, the light flickered out. In the darkness the companion suddenly called out the name of the dead miner and then a terrible cry was heard. When the lamp was relit, they found him dead at the bottom of a shaft. "Orders were at once given to wall up the fatal chamber, and now its existence is unknown to miners working in the colliery."<sup>13</sup>

Even stranger manifestations occur deep below the surface. One day in 1895, Patrick Shea, Victor Dougherty and Thomas Durkin entered a Germantown mine as they had been doing for the last 30 years. Then things got weird: "...an apparition suddenly appeared on the gangway. The opening was transformed into a fairyland and forms flitted about. The dark recesses were illuminated, spirits manifested themselves and the 'black diamonds' shone brilliantly. Cars were moved by invisible hands and doors were swung open." Villagers remembered the old legend that the Germantown mine had been haunted since a cave-in caused the deaths of 13 members of one family.<sup>14</sup>

Something similar occurred as recently as 1963. Miners David Fellin and Henry Throne were entombed in Sheppton mine in Pennsylvania. It took two weeks to dig them out. Throne said that during their ordeal they saw "lights, figures of people and a door". Fellin maintained it was no hallucination: "We saw what we saw. These things happened. I can't explain them... on the fourth or fifth day we saw this door although we had no

light from above or from our helmets. The door was covered in bright blue light. It was very clear, better than sunlight. Two men, ordinary looking men, not miners, opened the door. We could see beautiful marble steps on the other side."<sup>15</sup>

But perhaps the most malevolent of all American mine monsters is the terrible ladder dwarf, a hunchbacked creature with a short body, large head and enormously long and powerful arms. "In fact, he resembles an exaggerated gorilla. His favourite trick is climbing the ladders by means of which the miners leave the mines, raising himself with his long arms, and, as he passes the rungs, kicking them out one by one. He is supposed to always do this just before an accident of some kind." The mines of Mexico suffered a similar demonic pest. Miners entered the shafts by means of tree trunks with notches for the big toe of the miners to take a brief rest. "The demon in such places was believed to have on each big toe a huge nail or claw, with which he would gouge out the pieces on which the feet of the miners rested."<sup>16</sup> In Germany, the mines were haunted by two supernatural creatures called Kobold and Nickel. Nickel was not so bad, but if Kobold held a grudge against a miner, he would "drag him about by the nose or the hair or even throw him down a ladder or crush him beneath a downfall of rock".<sup>17</sup>

The most incredible tale of a mine haunting is that of the centaur roaming the Chickasaw coalmines in 1913. With a sepulchral voice it commanded the miners to drop their tools and go. "According to the men, the upper half of the spectre was like the body of an emaciated man, while the lower half resembled the hind quarters of a horse." In one hand it held an object from which streamed shafts of light.<sup>18</sup>

## NOTES

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*Traveler*, Arkansas City, KS, 20 April 1892. I sifted through 30 newspapers that carried the story between 1892 and 1920, but none identified the mine of the ladder dwarf.

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# Who Put Bella in the Wych Elm?

In April 1943 four teenage boys found the skeleton of an unidentified woman hidden in a tree in the West Midlands. As **CATHI UNSWORTH** explains, this was just the start of a wartime murder mystery involving puzzling graffiti, black magic rituals and Nazi spies.

**I**t would be difficult to conceive of a more perfect setting for a mystery novel than the Hagley Hall estate. The ancestral home of Viscount Cobham lies on the Worcestershire borders close to Stourbridge, tucked away from the industrial West Midlands by the swells and dips of the Clent Hills and swathes of woodlands, landscaped in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century by George Lyttleton,<sup>1</sup> who dotted the estate with follies fashioned from the local red sandstone – a Doric temple here, a ruined castle there and, marking the highest point of the land, at the summit of Wychbury Hill, an 84ft (26m) obelisk. On their completion, Hagley Hall's fashionable picturesque-style grounds were considered the most beautiful in all of England.

But it is not for their æsthetic merit that the grounds have achieved legend. Instead, it is for a deed carried out in the blackout of the Second World War, amid the carnage of the Birmingham Blitz, and only uncovered some 18 months later, when a bunch of schoolboys went out illicitly foraging in Hagley Woods in April 1943. The grim discovery they made and the mysterious sequence of events that that followed on from their find – and continues to this day – have all the hallmarks of a fairytale.

## DEEP IN THE WOODS

Teenagers Robert Hart, Thomas Willetts, Bob Farmer and Fred Payne had been playing football on Sunday 18 April 1943, when they decided to take a walk from the village of Wooldsote up to Hagley Woods. Contemporaneous press clippings about what happened next paint a conflicting picture, some stating it was early in the morning, others that it was twilight. To add



**LEFT:** Graffiti on the obelisk on Wychbury Hill in 2016. The obelisk is close to the Iron Age hillfort of Wychbury Ring, which is dotted with hollow elm trees and reputed to be used for witchcraft ceremonies to this day. **OPPOSITE:** The Wych Elm that accompanied Quaestor's articles in the *Wolverhampton Express and Star* in November 1953. Though similar in appearance to the tree in which the body was found, it is not the same one recorded in police crime scene photos.

estate was to search for some game for the pot.

It was a warm, sunny day and the bluebells were out in the stretch of woodland they walked into, parallel to and only 630

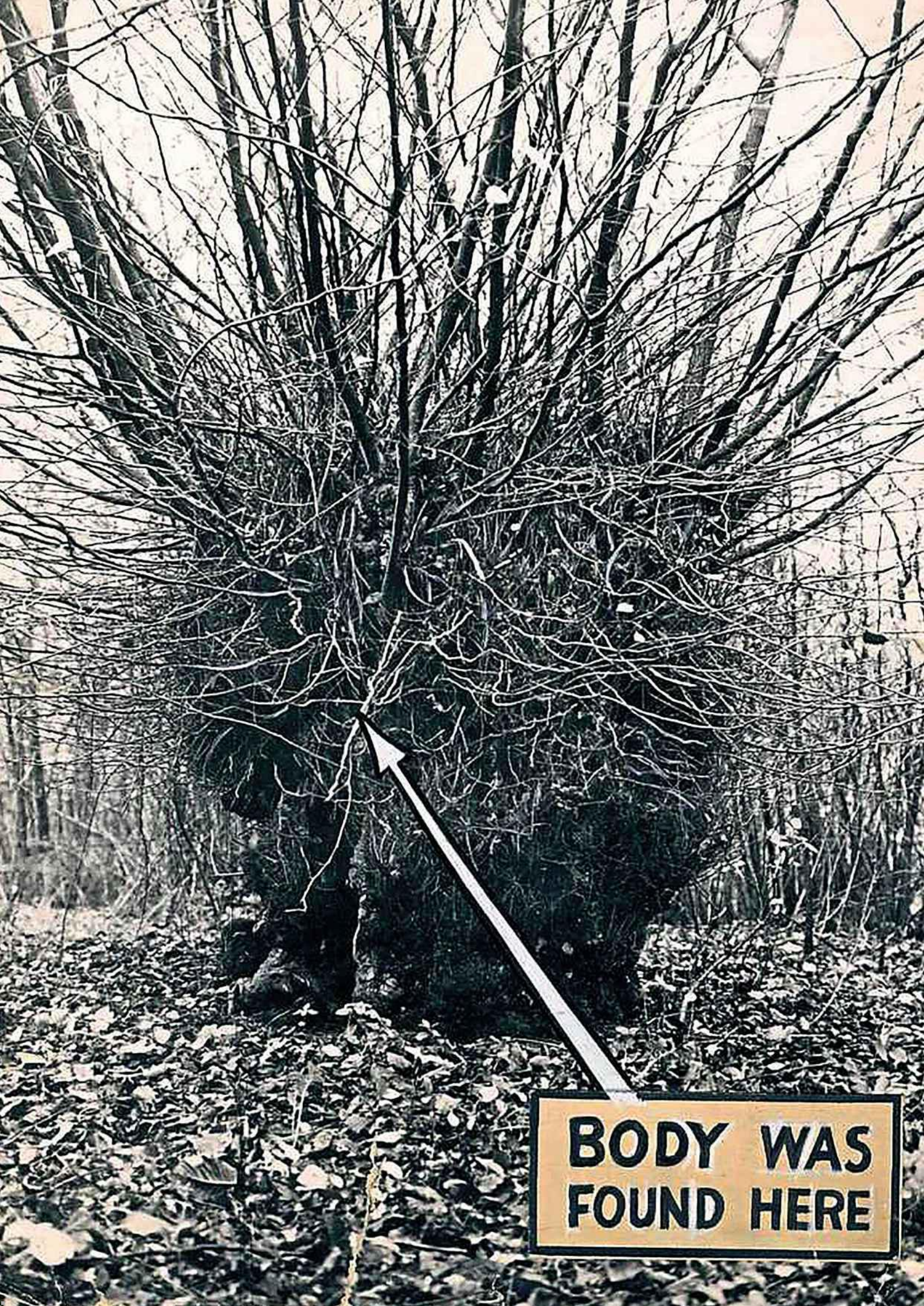
*He saw the empty  
eye sockets of a  
skull staring back  
up at him from  
the hollow trunk*

to the confusion, these reports variously say that there were between two and four boys in the party. Local paranormal researcher Jayne Harris, who has spent the last three years putting together a film about the case (see panel) found a local man, Tom Hart (no relation to Robert), who had joined in the game of football, and placed it in the afternoon. The reason that the four had been bold enough to trespass onto Lord Cobham's

yards (about a third of a mile) away from the Kidderminster to Birmingham Road. The cry of a fleeing blackbird drew their attention towards a massive witch hazel tree, known locally as the Wych Elm because of its nightmarish appearance: it had been so heavily coppiced that its thick, gnarled bole was surrounded by a crown of whiplash-thin branches that resembled the hair of a hag. As the then 15-year-old Bob Farmer moved towards it, he caught a glint of white amid the dense foliage and thought he had found a bird's nest. But as he closed in, he saw the empty eye sockets of a skull staring back up at him from the hollow trunk.

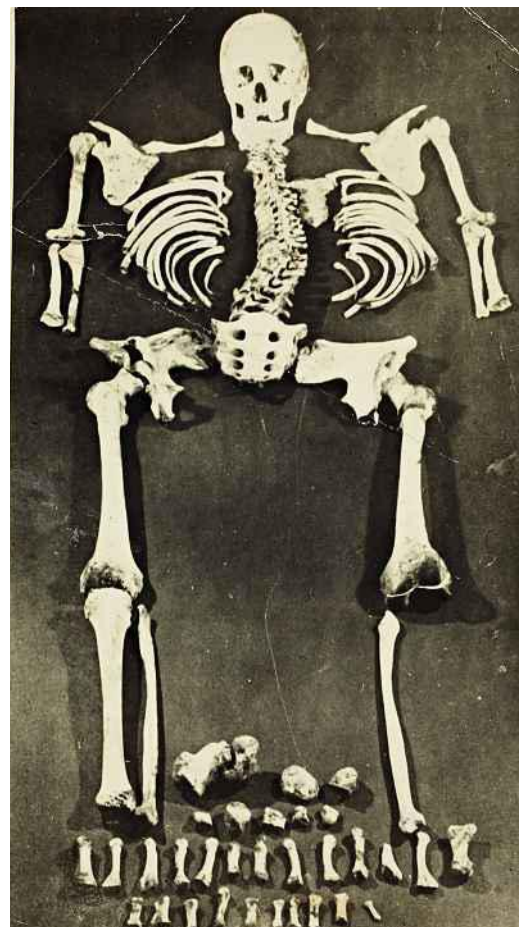
At first, he thought it might be an animal's skull, though logically he knew it was too large to belong to any natural inhabitant of West Midlands woodland. When he lifted it out of its hiding place,<sup>2</sup> he saw there was a small patch of skin from which a few strands of reddish-brown hair protruded. A jawbone with a set of prominent front teeth, the front left incisor crossed over the right, cemented the realisation that what he held in his





**BODY WAS  
FOUND HERE**





**ABOVE LEFT:** Crime scene photographs of the skull, with hair still attached, as it was taken out of the tree. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Prof Webster's reconstruction of the skeleton. **BELOW:** The victim's shoes, one of which was in the tree and one in woodland 100 yards away, were traced by police to a batch sold at Dudley market.

hands had once been a human head.

Terrified by what they had discovered – and by the fact that they might be caught by the gamekeeper and punished for trespassing or worse – the lads agreed to put it back where they had found it and tell no one what they'd seen. This resolve lasted only until bedtime for the youngest of their number, 13-year-old Tommy Willetts. Unable to face the terrors of the night, he broke down and confessed to his parents, who in turn alerted the Worcestershire County Police.

At first light the next morning, Superintendent JJ Hollyhead and Detective Inspector T Williams of the Worcestershire police, together with Detective Superintendent F Richardson from the Birmingham force, met at the site described by their witness with Professor James Webster, Head of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology from Birmingham University.<sup>3</sup> Inside the hollow tree, they found the remains of a woman, a crêpe-soled shoe and the decomposed clothing she had been wearing at the time of her death. The skeleton was not entirely complete. A further search of the surrounding woodland uncovered the bones of her right hand buried nearby, as well as the matching shoe to the one in the tree 100 yards away.



*A further search uncovered the bones of her right hand buried nearby*

Prof Webster took the remains back to his laboratory to compile a forensic report, issued on 23 April 1943. Following the publication of his findings, the Coroner's Inquest in Stourbridge on 28 April returned a verdict of "Murder by some person or persons unknown".

### **DRESSED FOR DEATH**

Five days later, at the first regional police conference following the exhumation, Prof Webster elucidated his findings to the assembled Birmingham police. What they had discovered, he said, was the body of a woman about 35 years of age, who was 5ft (1.5m) tall and had a "curious upper molar" and "some definite over-lapping of the incisors and the upper front teeth tended to project more than normal". He estimated she had been in the tree for between 18 months and three years.

The hollow had an upper aperture of 24in (60cm) and a lower aperture of 17in (43cm), therefore: "I cannot imagine a woman accidentally slipping in there, neither do I think it reasonable for a woman to crawl into that place to commit suicide. It was an excellent place for the concealment of a murder and I think it indicates local knowledge."

From the position of the bones the woman



was in a semi-reclining position. "She must have been put in before rigor mortis or after it passed off... She would either be killed close to the spot or was murdered in the near vicinity so that it was possible to convey her to the spot before rigor mortis set in." <sup>4</sup> Prior to this meeting, Police Reports circulated advice to investigating officers that: "The district where the skeleton was found was visited nightly by a large number of people from Birmingham, West Bromwich and Smethwick about 18 months to two years ago, during enemy raids on those districts. The district is also much frequented by pleasure seekers and courting couples." <sup>5</sup> This, alongside Prof Webster's conclusion about the manner of death, indicates that the police believed they were investigating a crime of passion. Among the remains of the victim's clothes, there had been recovered a faceted, rolled gold wedding ring, of an estimated value of 2s 6d. <sup>6</sup>

A nationwide search followed, with police first checking 3,000 missing persons' files from the surrounding 1,000 square miles (2,590km<sup>2</sup>). Prof Webster drew up a detailed picture of the woman and what she had been wearing at the time of her death. A fawn-coloured, homemade slip, "probably cut from coat lining" or perhaps, a nightie that she had hurriedly thrown her clothes on top of during an air raid – a portion of which was the same material recovered from the woman's throat and which, the Professor considered, had caused her death by asphyxiation. A wrap-around corsolet ("rather than a corset") and blue cotton locknit ("a very cheap type of") knickers but no stockings. A ribbed, striped cardigan in navy and mustard with cloth-covered buttons in a paler shade of blue and a mustard wool skirt. There was no coat; Prof Webster opined that the lightness of her dress indicated that the victim had taken her last walk in the woods in the summer. Her black, size 5½ crêpe-soled shoes had been made by the Waterfoot Company, Lancashire, <sup>7</sup> and the batch to which they belonged was traced by detectives to a market stall in Dudley.

Photographs of her teeth were also widely circulated around dental practices, and published in medical journals. But curiously, despite their distinctive appearance and the fact that she had had a recent extraction from her lower right jaw, these elicited no response.

The only lead these bulletins garnered was the re-examination of a report from July 1941, made by a local businessman who had heard screams coming from Hagley Woods one night as he walked back to his lodgings in Hagley Green. Along the way, he met a schoolteacher coming from the opposite direction who had heard the same noises. But when police were summoned to search the area they found nothing. The report fitted the timescale of the murder, and Prof Webster's theory that it was likely to have happened in summer, but ultimately led nowhere.

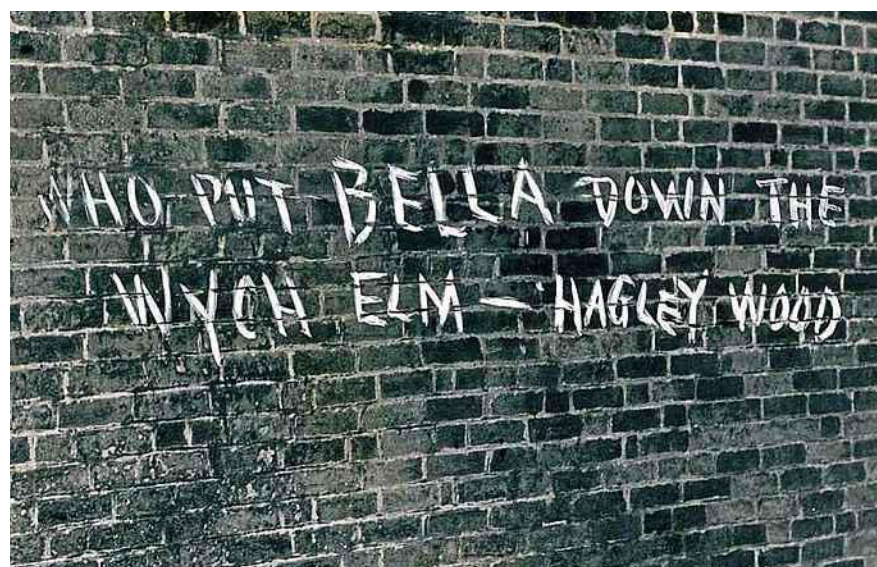
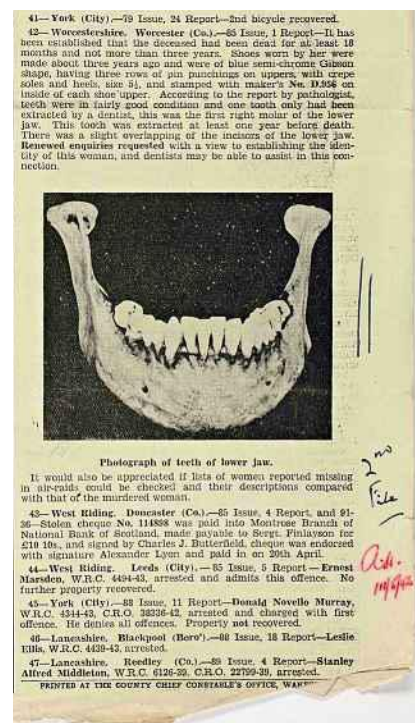
It seemed that nobody knew who the dead woman was... until a message was received in the night, just before the Christmas of 1943.

### THE WRITING ON THE WALL

It had been written in chalk, in capital letters three inches deep, on the side of a house in Hayden Hill Road, Old Hill, about a 15-minute walk from Hagley Road. WHO PUT LUBELLA DOWN THE WYCH ELM? it read. A few days later, another graffito in the same hand appeared in Upper Dean Street, Birmingham, asking: WHO PUT BELLA DOWN THE WYCH ELM HAGLEY WOOD? This was followed by two more, high up on the same block of buildings in the

fruit market area of the city, stating simply: HAGLEY WOOD BELLA. <sup>8</sup> Picking up on the links to the Hagley Woods skeleton, and noting that the communiqués appeared to have all been penned by the same hand, local press asked in return: *Do you know Bella?*

No one replied. But the skeleton in the tree now had a name that everyone, including the police, started using. And still the markings refused to go away. Similar words reappeared, scrawled on a five-bar gate at Hawne, Halesowen, and on a wall in Wolverhampton in August 1944. Both read: HAGLEY WOOD LUBELLA WAS OPPOSITE ROSE AND CROWN, HASBURY. Hasbury is a small village in the Halesowen district, close to where the initial message



TOP LEFT: Prof Webster's reconstruction of what the murdered woman was wearing at the time of her death, along with a photograph of her teeth that was widely distributed but to no avail.

ABOVE: The graffito that appeared in Upper Dean Street, Birmingham, just before Christmas 1943.



# THE MAGIC OF A MYSTERY

**CATHI UNSWORTH** talks to Jayne Harris, the director of a new documentary about the Hagley Wood murder



The Bella mystery is the focus of a compelling new documentary, *Who Put Bella in the Wych-Elm?*, by Stourbridge resident, journalist and paranormal investigator Jayne Harris (pictured at right).

"I live just a few miles from Hagley Woods and have been familiar with the graffiti for some years," she explains. "In late 2013, I decided I wanted to delve into a mystery for a 10-minute YouTube video. I was walking on Wychbury Hill one November afternoon, the sun was low in the sky and as it illuminated the obelisk, I suddenly realised that the best mystery of all was under my nose. When I got home, I began researching. It quickly became apparent that this needed to be longer than 10 minutes..."

The resulting film ended up taking three years to make, with many contributions from local residents, journalists and historians probing the case's multiple complexities and contradictions. "I love the twists and turns, and people's reactions to them," Jayne says. "More often than not they are left not knowing what to believe, even when they thought initially that they knew which theory was correct. The more you hear about each, the more you begin to wonder... Just when you think you may have cracked it, something will spin you around and you find yourself facing in another direction."

Some locals who weren't so keen on revisiting Bella were the inhabitants of Hagley Hall. "Lord Cobham dislikes the whole story and does not allow any kind of permissions when it comes to visiting the woods. The opening shot of the documentary was shot using a drone from the public footpath which runs parallel. They were not happy, and the



groundsman approached me to move on, but they couldn't stop me using the footage, as I was on a public area. Hagley Hall is a wedding venue now and they probably feel it will impact on its appeal."

Does she prefer any particular theory? "My favourite, in terms of pure imagination, is that she was involved in witchcraft, possibly part of a coven. However, I don't think it's likely. If I were being realistic, I'd put my money on her being a traveller. There are some coincidences which seem to point in that direction, and it would explain why no one came forward to claim her. Without her remains, I doubt we will ever have any solid clues to her identity. Chances are the killer is now dead, as would be any associates or confidantes, and so I'd say that the truth will remain buried. But maybe that's the beauty of it. Often the magic of a mystery is in keeping it such."

• For more information and to order a copy of the film, please go to [www.hdparanormal.com/bella](http://www.hdparanormal.com/bella)

appeared. This appeared to be the work of the same person. Yet police could find no trace of any woman, missing or otherwise, who went by this name.<sup>9</sup> Neither did the anonymous correspondent come forward. But another voice was about to be added to the deepening mystery, one that would cast the murder in a still darker hue.

## THE DEVIL RIDES OUT

Professor Margaret Murray had an academic career few women of her generation could rival. She had assisted the celebrated Egyptologist Flinders Petrie on his historic digs in Abydos as well as conducting her own excavations in Malta, Menorca and Palestine, pioneering archaeological work for which she received an honorary doctorate from University College London in 1931.<sup>10</sup>

Murray developed a concurrent interest in folklore and feminism just before World War I and published her first paper on a developing theory about an ancient witch cult in Europe in the journal *Folklore* in 1917. She had the revelation that: "the so-called Devil was simply a disguised man"<sup>11</sup> and "witches" were adherents of an old native religion that had been persecuted by the usurping Christians.

She went on to publish books expounding this theory – *The Witch Cult in Western Europe* (1921) and *The God of Witches* (1933) – that served to harm her reputation as a trustworthy researcher even as they attracted enthusiastic support from such occultists as Dion Fortune and Ralph Shirley and authors Aldous Huxley and Robert Graves.

Now Murray weighed into the Bella debate by drawing attention to the corpse's missing right hand.<sup>12</sup> This detail, overlooked by previous commentators, signified to her that the murder bore the hallmarks of a black magic ritual. A 'Hand of Glory' was a totem once obtained by cutting said limb from the corpse of a murderer that had been left to hang on a gibbet. Wrapped in black cloth along with various herbs and then buried close to the body from which it had been taken, it was supposed to stop the evil spirit of the murderer from wandering.<sup>13</sup> Murray said that it was another arcane tradition to imprison the spirit of a dead witch by putting her inside a hollow tree, adding to the potency of the murder's setting and the area's links to the ancient world: Wychbury Hill is also the site of Wychbury Ring, an Iron Age hill fort around which a circle of hollow elm trees cluster, although the name is actually unrelated, being derived from the Saxon Mercian sub-kingdom of Hwicce.

This was a theory that seized the public's imagination and continues to haunt the case to this day. However, it is worth remembering that Prof Webster's original report attached no importance to the missing hand. He merely stated that: "In such cases you have depredations caused not only by the weather but by vermin". In other words, it was more likely that an animal had carried it away. Contemporary author and archaeologist Brian Haughton raises an eyebrow on his blog:



"...if so, it would have had to have climbed five feet up into the tree and ventured down into the hole, sorting through the various bones until it found the hand, which was under the rest of the skeleton towards the bottom of the hole. Not typical animal behaviour one would think, yet not proof of a black magic murder either."<sup>14</sup>

Yet Professor Murray would have further cause to warn of black magic rites being practised in the Midlands. Two years later, on Valentine's Day 1945, 74-year-old hedger and ditcher Charles Walton, a widower who lived quietly in the Warwickshire village of Lower Quinton, was found sensationally murdered by the tools of his trade – pinned to the ground with his pitchfork, his trouncing hook embedded in his throat. A large cross was carved into his chest – a sign that indicated to Murray, and those who believed in witchcraft, that he was murdered by someone he had himself placed under a spell. Like Bella, Walton was found on a site loaded with significance: Meon Hill, where the Devil was once supposed to have kicked a boulder at Evesham Abbey and a ghostly hound reputedly still roams. Despite calling on the celebrated skills of Chief Inspector Robert Fabian of the Yard, the Walton case was never solved either.<sup>15</sup> It would again be twinned with the Hagley Woods mystery in Donald McCormick's sensational 1968 tome *Murder by Witchcraft*, a book that continues to throw out red herrings. But if Bella wasn't part of a coven, could she be linked instead to another, corporeal type of spook?

### THE CLAVERLEY CONNECTION

A decade passed without any developments. Then, in November 1953, the *Wolverhampton Express and Star* columnist Lt Col Wilfred Byford-Jones received an unsolicited letter. Under the name 'Quaestor', he had been running a series of atmospheric articles about the unsolved murder, returning to Hagley Woods at night on the 10th anniversary of the crime and mulling over Margaret Murray's theories, the possible links to the Walton case and the involvement of gypsies, a theory enthusiastically supported by the church warden.<sup>16</sup> "How could anyone but an inhabitant with an intimate knowledge of that forsaken place be able to distinguish in the dark which wych elm was the perfectly hollow one?" Quaestor asked his readers.

In response, he appeared to have drawn a sleeping source out of the shadows.

"Finish your articles re: the wych elm crime by all means," his correspondent

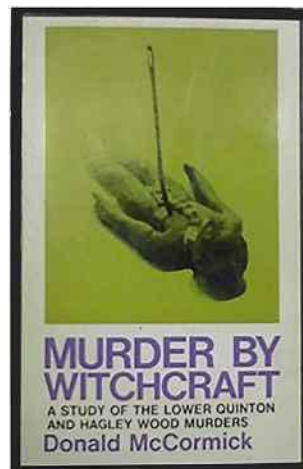


began. "They are interesting to your readers but you will never solve the mystery. The one person who could give you an answer is now beyond the jurisdiction of Earthly courts.

The affair is closed and involves no witches, black magic or Moon night rites. Much as I hate having to use a *nom-de-plume* I think you would appreciate it if you knew me. The only clues I can give you are that the person responsible for the crime died insane in 1942 and the victim was Dutch and arrived illegally in England in 1941. I have not wish to recall any more."

She signed herself "Anna, Claverley".

Byford-Jones passed the letter on to Worcestershire CID and met the mysterious Anna on 5 December 1954 at the Monks' Room at the Dick Whittington Inn, Kinver.



**LEFT:** Margaret Murray, who offered up the theory that Bella had been killed in a Black Magic ritual. **BELOW:** Murray suggested that Bella's hand had been severed in order to make a Hand of Glory, like the one on display in Whitby Museum. **BOTTOM:** Donald McCormick's infamous *Murder By Witchcraft* linked the Hagley Woods murder to the murder of Charles Walton on Meon Hill, Warwickshire, in 1945, which also appeared to be witchcraft-related, and offered the theory that Bella was a Nazi spy and occultist.

She told him a story about a spy ring passing on secrets to the Germans so that armaments factories in Birmingham could be targeted by the Luftwaffe. It involved a Dutchman, a male trapeze artist then appearing at the Birmingham Hippodrome and a former officer of the British armed forces who died insane in an asylum in 1942 after he had confessed to witnessing the killing of the Dutchwoman by the Dutchman in the back of his black Rover car and helping him to hide her body in Hagley Woods.

This all seemed very promising. Could the screams heard by the homecoming businessman in July 1941 have been from this crime being carried out? Anna herself was later revealed to be Una Mossop, whose husband Jack, a former RAF pilot, was working as an engineer at the Standard Aero Works when he told her he had sold information to a 'Dutchman' called Van Ralt.<sup>17</sup> who was really a Nazi agent. Quaestor later wrote that MI5 had been brought in to verify these details.<sup>18</sup> But crucially, did they identify the woman in the tree?

Police acting on Mossop's information sought out a Dutchwoman called Laura Francis Ryllis Van-Raalte, who was working as a schoolteacher in Great Malvern, Worcestershire, in 1940, when she was alleged to have been teaching her pupils to sing the German National Anthem. However,

this possible Bella was found to be alive and well and living in Nottingham in 1954.<sup>19</sup>

The aforementioned *Murder By Witchcraft* made various attempts to identify the Dutchman with known Nazi spies that have morphed, via newspaper and Internet articles over the intervening years, into a phantom named Clarabella Dronkers. McCormick says that a woman called Clara was dropped into the Midlands by parachute in 1941. He goes on to link her not only to the actual Dutch spy Johannes Marius Dronkers, who was

caught and executed in 1942, but also "a man called Lehrer", whose true identity has never





**LEFT:** The signed photograph of actress and singer Clara Bauerle found in the lining of Josef Jakobs's suit. **BELOW:** Jakobs was captured in the Huntingdonshire fens in January 1941 and told MI5 that Bauerle was an active agent working in the Midlands. **FACING PAGE:** Hagley Woods in September 2016. Local residents told the author that these fresh signs had gone up in the previous two weeks.

Ramsay, near Peterborough, in January 1941. Jakobs had been supplied with fake identification papers, a longwave radio concealed inside an attaché case, a map with two nearby RAF stations ringed on it, and over £400 in cash. In the lining of his suit was a photograph of a glamorous woman, with a love message written on the back, in English, and signed: *Your Clara*.

She was, Jakobs told his interrogators, his lover – an actress and singer called Clara Bauerle, whom he had first met in Hamburg when she was singing with the Bernhard Ette Orchestra in the Café Dreyer. Clara was an influential woman, connected to senior Nazis, who worked as a secret agent. She had spent two years in the music halls of the West Midlands before the War and spoke English with a Birmingham accent, so had easily been able to establish an undercover identity for herself within this world. Clara had recruited Jakobs, a World War I veteran originally from Luxemburg, who had spent time in jail for forgery, to join her in a life of espionage. He told his interrogators that his brief had been to make radio contact with her as soon as he landed. Instead, he had been surrounded by farmers and captured.

Jakobs, who was in fragile physical and mental health during his interrogation, was not considered to be of any potential use to British Intelligence and so became the last man ever to be executed at the Tower of London. He was convicted under the Treachery Act of 1940 at a court-martial held in camera at the Duke of York's HQ, Chelsea, on 4-5 August 1941, and dispatched by firing squad at 7.12am on 15 August at a miniature rifle range within the Tower. Because of his frail condition, Jakobs was placed in a chair with a target pinned to his chest before members of the Scots Guards performed their duty.<sup>21</sup>

Reporting this story on 27 March 2013, Allison Vale in *The Independent* joined some dots between Clara Baurele, McCormick's Nazi spy and occultist Clarabella<sup>22</sup> and the show business connections of Quaestor's Anna and her trapeze artist. Reproducing the picture Jakobs had worn so close to his heart, the piece ran under the headline *Is this Bella in the wych elm?* Concluding that all traces of Clara Bauerle's existence appeared to have vanished after spring 1941, it was the most dramatic twist in the Bella tale yet.

And yet... Prof Webster's autopsy clearly states that the woman in the tree was 5ft tall, while Clara Baurele was reputedly almost

been established. That parachute harnesses were recovered from Hagley Woods during the War lends a tenuous credence to this notion.<sup>20</sup>

While nothing more concrete ever seems to have ever come from his informant, Quaestor's comment about MI5 remains interesting; because subsequent to him making it, Bella's remains, which were never buried, disappeared from Birmingham Medical School. Had she been spirited away by spooks after all?

### THE SPY WHO FELL IN FROM THE COLD

Six years ago, a declassified MI5 file was released to the National Archives. It detailed the interrogation of a German agent named Josef Jakobs, arrested after breaking his ankle as he was parachuted into the snowy depths of the Huntingdonshire fens at







6ft. Though her trail of recordings and film appearances does indeed dry up around 1941, Jakobs's granddaughter Giselle was able to furnish Jayne Harris with more compelling evidence: a death certificate stating that the actress Hedwig Klara Bauerle died on 16 December 1942 at the Konigin-Elisabeth Hospital in Berlin. <sup>23</sup>

### SHE WALKS THESE HILLS...

Still, none of this has effectively laid Bella to rest. Though a report in the *Birmingham Gazette* from 28 November 1953 quotes Detective Superintendent Tom Williams as stating that he had tracked down and questioned the author of the original Bella graffiti and dismissed him as "a crank who had nothing to do with the case," the writing keeps reappearing.

Forty years after the first batch, the question WHO PUT BELLA IN THE WYCH ELM? was posed again on a car park wall in Hagley in August 1984, and dismissed by West Mercia police as a teenage prank. On the morning of 18 August 1999, the sun rose over Wychbury Hill to reveal the same message written across the obelisk in tall white letters. When this writer visited the site on 1 October 2016 it remained – and

various cardboard signs begging for the same information had been hung about Hagley Woods, close to where the original Wych Elm – the exact location of which has now also vanished into the ether, along with its grisly contents – was said to have been.

That is not to mention the inspiration Bella's story has given to musicians, artists, filmmakers and writers down the years since the Wych Elm gave up one secret only to spawn a legion more. Perhaps the only conclusion that can be drawn from the entire mystery is that it is one destined never to be solved.

✦ **CATHI UNSWORTH** is the author of six pop-cultural crime novels inspired by true-life forgotten histories and unexplained mysteries. Her latest, *That Old Black Magic*,



based on the Hagley Woods mystery and the trial of medium Helen Duncan, the last woman to be prosecuted for witchcraft in Britain in 1944, is published by Serpent's Tail on 8 March. For more, visit [www.cathiunsworth.com](http://www.cathiunsworth.com).

### NOTES

**1** From [www.hagleyhall.com](http://www.hagleyhall.com). The first Lord Lyttleton was a poet who was secretary to Frederick, Prince of Wales, and briefly held the office of Chancellor of the Exchequer. Advised by his friend Horace Walpole, Lyttleton's designs were drawn up by local architect Sanderson Miller of Radway in Warwickshire. The temple is a replica of the 7th-century Temple of Hephæstus, the God of Masonry, in Athens.

**2** In 1994, for local TV news item *Crimestalker*, Bob Farmer and Bob Hart returned to the woods to recall that day. Farmer said he had recovered the skull from the tree with a stick, which he claimed had pushed in the material that the pathologist said caused Bella's death. Farmer's story has changed over time, as has the location in the filmed reconstruction, which was clearly not the original tree. (*Crimestalker Case Book 14* Sep 1994, Central Broadcasting Birmingham)

**3** The Home Office Forensic Science Laboratory had been set up at Birmingham University just prior to World War II.

**4** Minutes of the No 9 Regional Conference, Birmingham, 3 May 1943. Coroner's Report, James Webster, Professor of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology, University of Birmingham 23 April 1943

**5** *Police Reports no 85*, 30 April 1943.

**6** Ibid.

**7** Minutes of the No 9 Regional Conference, Birmingham, 3 May 1943. Coroner's Report, James Webster, Professor of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology, University of Birmingham, 23 April 1943

**8** *Birmingham Evening Dispatch*, 30 Mar 1944; *Birmingham Sunday Pictorial*, 2 April 1944.

**9** *Birmingham Gazette*, 7 Aug 1944.

**10** For a contemporary assessment of Margaret Murray's career, see Ruth Whitehouse's article: [www.ai-journal.com/articles/10.5334/ai.1608/](http://www.ai-journal.com/articles/10.5334/ai.1608/)

**11** Margaret Murray, *My First Hundred Years* (Oates & Wood, 1998; first published 1968).

**12** Although referenced in all articles and books about the Bella case, the actual source article from which Prof Murray's claims were first published remains a mystery. It is usually cited as being published 'in a local paper' and it seems to have been contemporaneous to the Charles Walton murder in 1946. During the course of researching this article I consulted Professor Ronald Hutton, the country's leading expert on witchcraft, who said that despite his own exhaustive research in local newspaper archives he has never been able to trace the article.

**13** A Hand of Glory is also claimed to protect its owner from evil spirits, put enemies under an enchantment and reveal where treasure is hidden.

You can see an example of one, found in Castleton, North Yorkshire in 1935 by stonemason and local historian Joseph Ford, at Whitby Museum, Whitby, North Yorkshire, (see **FT357:43**).

**14** [brian-haughton.com/ancient-mysteries-articles/bella\\_in\\_the\\_wych-elm/2/](http://brian-haughton.com/ancient-mysteries-articles/bella_in_the_wych-elm/2/)

**15** During the investigation, DS Alex Spooner of Warwickshire CID drew Fabian's attention to the 1929 book *Folklore, Old Customs and Superstitions in Shakespeareland*, by J Harvey Bloom. In it, a striking passage noted a Charles Walton who died in 1885 – 60 years before this victim's death – after seeing a ghost. The 1945 case remains the oldest unsolved murder on the Warwickshire force's books.

**16** A H Hodges, the warden at St Kenelm's Church, close to the murder site, told Quasetor: "I don't think the murder was done in the wood. I think she was a gypsy and was tried and condemned by her tribe for having the evil eye. I saw some real old types of gypsies out here about that time. They don't ever go to the police if they have trouble but mete out their own justice." This is not a theory the police ever had any truck with. The article ran with a picture of the witch hazel, which although terrifying in appearance, is not the same one recorded in the police files. "The hags of old days used the hazel twigs for divining rods", says the accompanying caption. *Express and Star*, 19-20

Nov 1953.

**17** Statement of Una Mossop to Coventry city police.

**18** Quasetor, *Express and Star*, 16 Jan 1958.

**19** Memo from Nottingham CID to Worcestershire constabulary, 6 Jan 1954.

**20** See David Tremain's *Rough Justice: The True Story of Agent Dronkers, The Enemy Spy Caught by the British*, (Amberley Publishing, 2017) for more on this.

**21** British Military and Criminal History, [www.stephen-stratford.com/josef\\_jakobs.htm](http://www.stephen-stratford.com/josef_jakobs.htm) and [www.josefjakobs.info/p/blog-page.html](http://www.josefjakobs.info/p/blog-page.html)

**22** McCormick, via his alleged informant 'Herr Franz Rathgreb' describes Clara as a student of astrology who had perhaps disappeared in 1941 as a result of Aktion Hess, the purge of astrologers and occultists that was initiated in Germany after the capture of Herman Hess in Scotland on 10 May 1941.

**23** There is a copy of this Death Certificate, plus translation, at [www.josefjakobs.info/2016/09/clara-bauerle-is-finally-laid-to-rest.html](http://www.josefjakobs.info/2016/09/clara-bauerle-is-finally-laid-to-rest.html). This potential Bella's death was not a pleasant one either.

Many thanks to Dr Mike Dash in the compilation of this research.



# The Return of the Silpho Moor Saucer

It has been called the UK's first undisputed 'crashed' flying saucer and it is a strong contender for the title of 'Britain's Roswell'. But for 60 years the truth about a strange object found on the North York Moors has remained shrouded in mystery. That was until **DR DAVID CLARKE** found the remains of the Silpho Saucer – hidden in London's Science Museum.

**B**efore the credits roll in the 1981 blockbuster *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, an exasperated Indiana Jones (Harrison Ford) is told by officials from US Army intelligence that the recovered Ark of the Covenant is somewhere safe and will be studied by 'top men'. In the final scenes the Ark, described in the movie as a radio used by the prophet Moses to talk to God, is shown being stored in a giant government warehouse among countless other crates.

Whilst *Raiders* is avowed fiction, director Steven Spielberg drew directly upon UFO folklore in his idea of a secret hangar where the powers that be hid fragments of spacecraft, ancient aliens and other fortaen oddities.<sup>1</sup> The cinematic legend riffs on unsolved mysteries like the ultimate fate of the wreckage from the object that 'landed' on a ranch near Roswell in 1947 and, by implication other cases, such as the strange metal object, shaped like a flying saucer, that was found by three men on the North York Moors in northern England one night in November 1957. What both have in common with other crashed airship and saucer tales is the presence of unfamiliar hieroglyphics etched, or drawn, upon the metallic remains, which finders interpret as evidence they are 'not of this Earth'. In the case of the miniature saucer on Silpho Moor, the mysterious circumstances in which it was found could easily have been used in the plot of a Cold War spy novel or provided a case file for Mulder and Scully.

## COLD WAR FEARS

Context is, of course, everything; and the story broke in the Yorkshire newspapers just weeks after the launch into Earth orbit of Sputnik, the first artificial satellite. Sputnik was tracked by the giant Jodrell Bank radio-



LEFT: A headline from the Scarborough Evening News, 9 Dec 1957. FACING PAGE: Reports from the Yorkshire Post (top) and the Northern Echo, 9 Dec 1957.

Frank Hutton, to avoid identification, as did the others.

According to his story, Dickenson then left the car with his torch, climbed a steep bank and found the metallic saucer lying in a

patch of bracken. But as he returned along a footpath to alert his friends, he passed a young couple walking toward the scene. When the three men returned to search the moors, the object was gone.

Dickenson was so desperate to get it back that he placed a classified advert in the Scarborough newspaper. This was answered by someone claiming to be the mystery man on the moor, who initially demanded £200 in £1 notes. The local newspaper said Dickenson later handed over just £10 (£200 in today's money) in a night-time exchange for the metal object, which was hidden in an old lentil sack. He then asked his solicitor, Anthony Parker, who was known to have an interest in UFOs, to examine it at his home at Scalby. Parker, using the pseudonym Antony Avendel, told the press he advised Dickenson to turn it over to the Air Ministry and said: "I do not think it is a flying saucer and I do not believe such things come from outer space."<sup>3</sup>

Photographs taken by Manchester UFO researcher Dr John Dale, later published in *Flying Saucer Review*, show the copper base of the object was inscribed with hieroglyphs that Parker had initially compared to the Russian alphabet.<sup>4</sup> The object appears to have been constructed in two sections, with a copper bottom and a top section made from layers of laminated metal that at some stage had been hand-painted with a white substance.

## The copper base of the object was inscribed with hieroglyphs

telescope in Cheshire, which moonlighted as the UK's first early warning radar, and when news of the Soviet Union's breakthrough came it was greeted with a flood of UFO 'sightings' across the world, along with claims of alien contact.<sup>2</sup> The enigmatic Silpho Saucer appeared in the midst of this mini-flap – and then vanished without trace.

The story entered the public domain on 9 December 1957 when the *Yorkshire Post* revealed how "a mystery object" shaped "like a large flattish spinning top", 45cm (18in) in diameter and weighing 15kg (33lb), had been found on the moor northwest of the town two weeks earlier. Scarborough businessman Frank Dickenson claimed he and two friends were driving up Reasty Hill near the village of Silpho at night when his car stalled and they saw "a glowing object in the sky" that appeared to fall to the ground on a ridge above Broxa Forest. Initially, Dickenson used a *nom de guerre*,



*Has Yorkshire got a flying saucer?*



*The object found on Silpho Moors.*

## Mystery object found on Scarborough moors HAS 'UNUSUAL HIEROGLYPHICS'

*From our Scarborough staff*

### A MESSAGE FROM ULLO

Later that December Parker and Dickenson were joined by Philip Longbottom, a Scarborough café proprietor, who had offered his services "as an ex-electrical and mechanical engineer" to help them open this curious object and examine its contents. Working together, the trio split open the two halves, which appeared to have been stuck together with a greyish substance resembling cellulose filler, but they were thwarted by the presence of an iron rod, the thickness of a pencil, "which ran through a sort of white metal bearing in the top half". This was drilled out. Inside the cavity they found a heap of ash, pieces of fused glass and a tightly rolled cylinder of copper. The latter had "a coil of hollow tubing wrapped around it".

When opened and cleaned, a tiny booklet was found to consist of 17 sheets of thin copper foil fastened at one edge. Even at this stage the trio said they were sceptical, as the inconsistent placing of charred material inside the artefact suggested the



**A** NORTHERN Echo representative with what the Americans would nowadays call a whatnik—an "unidentified flying object," said to have come down on the moors near Scarborough, which has been bought by two Scarborough men. Below: Hieroglyphics on The Thing.—(Report: Page Seven)



## MORE QUESTIONS THAN ANSWERS

The Silpho Moor saucer was found in an area of the North York Moors that has some similarities to Rendlesham Forest in Suffolk, home of the famous UFO incident. The tiny village of Silpho (with less than 100 inhabitants) sits below a wooded escarpment covered by the ancient Broxa Forest. Parts were cleared in the Bronze Age and it contains several earth barrows and a series of deep earthworks known as the Thieves Dikes. Today, the mixed woodland is managed by the Forestry Commission who planted the slopes with pines and conifers. From the top of the ridge, Fylingdales Moor, site of Britain's Ballistic Missile Early Warning Station, can be seen six miles away to the northwest.

Between 1953 and 1992 RAF Fylingdales's iconic white golfballs, now replaced by a single pyramid, provided the UK with its chilling 'four-minute warning' of a nuclear attack from the Soviet Union. The station became operational in 1963, at the height of the Cold War, when its top secret over-the-horizon radars replaced a wartime mortar range. When the Silpho saucer was discovered, the local newspapers were filled with speculation that the mystery object could have been part of a hydrogen bomb, a secret surveillance object dropped by Soviet spies, or a wartime mine.

Even more bizarre, the Broxa Forest became the centre of a huge security operation in March 1989 when a cache of guns, ammunition and bomb-making equipment was found buried there. The discovery was made by a local man searching for leaf compost for his garden in part of the forest known as Turkey Carpet. The cache included Czech-made Semtex explosive, a key component in bombs used by the IRA in their terror campaign on the British mainland. Police and security forces were alarmed because the weapons were found just days before the Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was due to speak at the Conservative Party conference at Scarborough. Four years earlier, Mrs Thatcher and her cabinet had a narrow escape from an IRA bomb planted in a Brighton hotel that killed 31 people.



# AN EXAMINATION OF THE SILPHO DEBRIS



**ABOVE:** The contents of the tin cigarette box – five specimens from the ‘Silpho Moor Object’. **BELOW:** Or ‘alleged UFO bits’ as the V&A label has it.

In 1963, CC Stevens, a ufologist from Essex, presented five specimens from the ‘Silpho Moor Object’ to the Science Museum in London for scientific examination. A detailed list of technical questions “it would be interesting to have answered” was attached to his covering letter. The specimens were enclosed in a package, loosely hidden inside flimsy paper envelopes. Today these are labelled A-E, with accompanying captions, as follows:

A - ‘Copper Slice’, a section of the outer casing from the Silpho Object; “external surface laminated and whitened, inner surface work-marked”. Stevens claimed the outer surface, under the white paint, was “curious”.

B – A 4in (10cm) copper tube, about 4.76mm in thickness, “this was wound helically round the rolled ‘booklet’ that contained 17 thin copper sheets, similar to foil”.

C – A tiny sample of copper foil from the ‘booklet’, just 1.3cm x 0.5cm in size: “if desired it might be possible to obtain more, or all, of the booklet cum message”.

D – Piece of dark carbon-like fused material from inside the Silpho object: “The oblong cut was made by another examiner [and] the ‘hatched’ markings appear to resemble the work-marks on the inner surface of [the sample] A”.

E – A sample of the “bonding material” found inside the two sections of the object when it was opened in Scarborough.

The package was opened by Museum’s Keeper of Public Relations, aviation historian



and polymath Charles H Gibbs-Smith. He had an unconventional hobby – UFOs – and was a consultant for *Flying Saucer Review*. In 1959 he recorded a short programme for BBC Radio 4 where he defended the study of UFOs and other fringe subjects against sceptical scientists. This may explain why Stevens decided to send the specimens to him.

Gibbs-Smith passed the debris to a colleague at the Natural History Museum’s Department of Mineralogy. Former wartime SOE agent Gordon Frank Claringbull (1911-1990) was an expert on explosives and had examined alleged meteorite samples that had been donated to the museum. Claringbull scrutinised the debris and showed it to others at the museum

complex in South Kensington. One piece of fused metal from inside the object (labelled ‘D’), could not be identified but appeared to be an amalgam of metal and plastic, possibly polystyrene. Claringbull concluded “there appears to be nothing unusual” about any of them, adding: “I am prepared to wager anything that they are terrestrial.” Returning the package to Gibbs-Smith, he suggested “the most likely people to identify them are your friends” at the Royal Aircraft Establishment at Farnborough.

There is no evidence in the Science Museum Group archives that Gibbs-Smith sent the debris for further investigation after Claringbull’s report landed on his desk. In response, he wrote: “It is rather what I expected, and therefore my suspicions of the ‘collectors’ will remain.” Responding to Stevens after a lengthy delay in 1965, Gibbs-Smith offered to “have them [the specimens] done up carefully in a box” and posted back to Essex. Fortunately for us, it seems Stevens never asked for them back. Nothing more was heard from the mysterious Essex collector.

The five pieces of debris, in their paper wrappings, were placed inside a tin cigarette box beneath a hand-written Victoria and Albert Museum label: “alleged UFO bits”. After Gibbs-Smith’s death in 1981 the box, along with a collection of his papers on UFOs, was donated to the Science Museum. There the package remained for 50 years, until I opened the box and found the remains of the Silpho Saucer.



object's creators wanted to make it appear that the object had been exposed to high temperatures. Writing in *FSR*, Longbottom said he found the booklet was engraved with more of the phonetic-type symbols that were present on the copper base of the object. This utilised a moderately simple code whereby phonetic sounds were used to match the repeated symbol 'T' drawn at different angles within a circle. Longbottom went on to devote "100 hours" to deciphering the message, using the letters on the base of the object as a 'key'. The astonishing 2,000-word statement that emerged claimed to be from an alien called Ullo, with later text appended by an apparently female companion called Tarngee.<sup>5</sup>

Jenny Randles summarises the contents in her account of the Silpho Moor mystery.<sup>6</sup> It begins with "I write this message to you friends on the planet of the sun you call earth (sic)" and warns humans not to travel into space because the speed and acceleration required would prove fatal. The Silpho device is described as an "old damaged space probe vehicle" that was part of a renegade mission to Earth after the aliens' ruling council had decreed there should be no contact, because of humans' misuse of atomic weapons. They preferred to wait until we were no longer fighting each other to make contact, adding ominously: "You will improve or disappear."

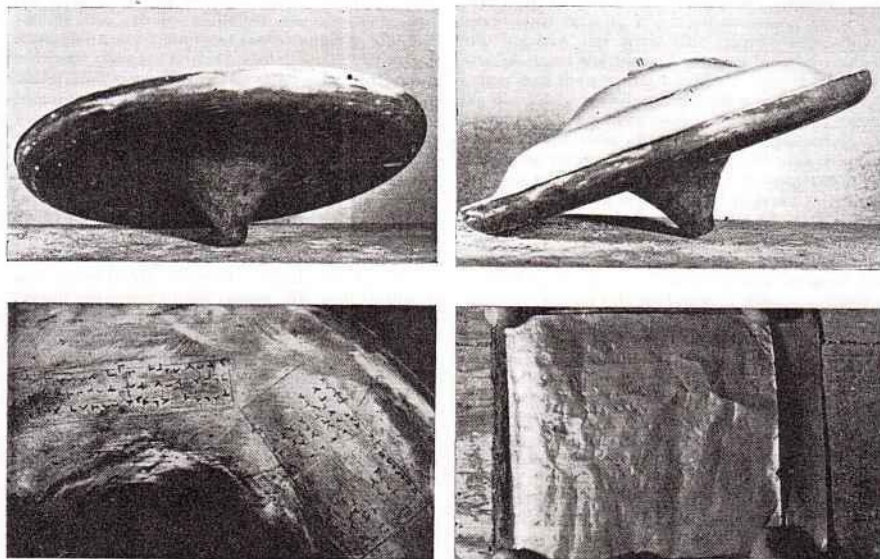
But attempts by Ullo and Tarngee to inject humour into the rather po-faced message point to a more down-to-earth source for its authors. The latter, for instance, says there are "four women for every man" on their world, adding "there is no reason to remove clothes to find measures". The message also critiques early rock music, noting "some is better than we can make" but "much is howling as in pain".

Even *FSR*'s editor, Brinsley le Poer Trench, later to become Lord Clancarty, found the message difficult to believe, especially as it dismissed the stories of contactees such as George Adamski, popular at the time, as hoaxes. This did not deter believers such as Air Chief Marshal Lord Dowding, who led the RAF during the Battle of Britain during WWII, whose Spiritualist beliefs led him to publicly proclaim his belief in flying saucers. In 1959, Lord Dowding reveals, he had "actually held and examined" the Silpho object, which he described as a "a miniature pilot flying saucer". He added that he was convinced it was a genuine artefact from space and the hieroglyphics it contained "were unlike any language known on Earth".<sup>7</sup>

Jenny's account reveals that Dr John Dale arranged for tests to be carried out on the remains of the object in a laboratory at Manchester University. These revealed the saucer's outer casing was primarily made from lead and the copper foil was triple laminated and "unusually pure [in] that the normal tin and nickel impurity content (one part per 10,000) was completely absent from the sample within this disc". Nevertheless,

## SILPHO MOOR CONTROVERSY

"FLYING SAUCER REVIEW" published in its March-April issue a full account of the mysterious small, saucer-shaped object that fell on Silpho Moor, near Scarborough, Yorkshire, England, on November 21, 1957. The object was seen to fall by three men. It weighed 35 lb., was 18 inches across and had hieroglyphics on the outside. Inside was a copper book with 17 thin copper sheets with more than 2,000 words engraved in phonetic-type symbols. Mr. P. Longbottom put in over 100 hours' work breaking down the code and transcribing the message which purported to be from a gentleman called Ulo in outer space. Controversy has raged fiercely over the authenticity or otherwise of this object. If it is a hoax, then this is certainly an ambitious one. We now reproduce through the courtesy of both Dr. James B. Williamson, of Middleton, Manchester, and of the Manchester Flying Saucer Research Society four photographs of this unusual object. The top two pictures are different angle shots of the saucer. The bottom left-hand photograph shows the hieroglyphics on the outside of the saucer, and the bottom right-hand one shows the copper book found inside the object.



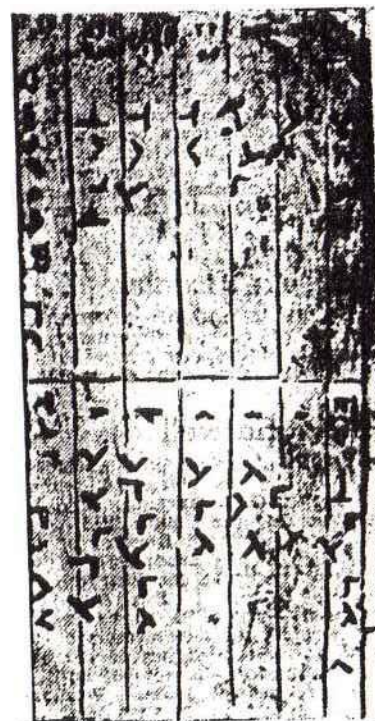
ABOVE: In 1958 the *Flying Saucer Review* published photos of the "mysterious, small, saucer-shaped object" and the hieroglyphics found on its base and in the "copper book" inside it. BELOW: The hieroglyphs, as seen in the *Yorkshire Post* on 9 December 1957.

the metallurgist, who wished to remain anonymous, concluded it could not have arrived on Earth from space as there was no evidence it had been exposed to air above the temperature of 150°C (320°F).

### LOST AND FOUND

From 1960 the trail went cold, and for decades afterwards UFO enthusiasts drew a blank in their quest for the missing saucer – although one story claimed it ended up in a scrapyards or had been on display in a fish and chip shop in Scarborough. But for more than half a century the missing pieces of the puzzle have been sitting inside a tin cigarette box at the Science Museum Group's archive, more than 200 miles away from the wild moorland where they were found at the height of the Cold War.

In November 2017 I presented a paper on the British Ministry of Defence's UFO files to a gathering of scientific archivists at the museum's Dana Centre in South Kensington. During the conference proceedings one of the archivists tapped me on the shoulder and asked if I was aware that "bits of a flying saucer kept in a cigarette tin" had been gathering dust in the museum's closed archive for decades. I soon discovered the



One of the panels on the back of the "saucer."





ABOVE: Dr David Clarke “holding a piece of a crashed flying saucer. I never thought I would get to say that!”

tin was part of a collection of papers donated to the Science Museum by former research fellow Charles Gibbs-Smith, who was well-known in the 1960s for his pro-UFO beliefs.

An appointment was made to examine the Gibbs-Smith papers. They revealed how the remains of the ‘Silpho Moor Object’ were sent by a ufologist in Essex to the Victoria and Albert Museum in London for examination by experts in 1963. Unfortunately the paper trail did not reveal how the remains travelled from Scarborough to Brentwood, or the fate of the larger sections of the miniature saucer. But the surviving specimens included a fused section of the metal and plastic from the outer casing, a length of hollow copper tubing and tiny pieces of foil from the booklet that was translated by Philip Longbottom in 1958.<sup>8</sup>

The museum passed them to the Natural History Museum for analysis, but their conclusions (see ‘An examination of the Silpho debris’ on p44) added further to Gibbs-Smith’s suspicion that the saucer was an elaborate hoax by persons unknown. The prank, if such it was, was just the first in a long series of similar UFO-themed hoaxes in the UK that include the six miniature flying saucers discovered in locations across southern Britain in September 1967. These convincing devices triggered a national alert, with police and army bomb disposal teams scrambled to investigate. Peace was restored when it was revealed as a rag-day fund-raising stunt by apprentices from the Royal

Aircraft Establishment and Farnborough Technical College (see John Keeling’s article in **FT228:32-41** for the full story).

But if the Silpho Saucer was a simple hoax then why did the culprits never confess? And were Dickenson, Parker and the others involved from the start, or mere innocent dupes? In 1988 the *Scarborough Evening News* tracked down what it called “the last surviving member of the three-man group” involved in the controversy. Frank Dickenson, then aged 75, maintained he did see a red light fall from the sky before he discovered the object on the moors. “I don’t know if there was a deliberate hoax involved,” he said. “But I don’t believe the object came from space.”<sup>9</sup>

Inquiries with veteran Scarborough journalists drew a weary response. Retired news-editor Mick Jefferson recalled that “after all the hue and cry had died down the [Scarborough] *Evening News* exposed the whole thing as an elaborate hoax that got very much out of hand. The ‘saucer’ was made from a domestic hot-water cylinder in a small back street garage.” He added: “Earnest UFO enthusiasts haven’t always been too pleased to get this old news from me. I’ve been all-but accused several times of being part of an international Establishment cover-up – which has at least given me a laugh.” (10)

*FT* columnist Jenny Randles refers to the Silpho story as “the UK’s first undisputed crashed saucer” and possibly “the most costly and well organised hoax that has ever taken place in Britain”. But the motivation of the

perpetrators remains a mystery. They never seemed to gain from it and whoever had it built “spent considerably more than the £10 the finders reportedly paid for it”.

The last words should go to Frank Dickenson, who told a reporter in 1988: “Wherever it came from, I’d say it was something that had been fashioned by human hands”.

#### NOTES

**1** The fourth film in the Indiana Jones franchise, *The Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (2008), continues the theme with its opening scene set in 1957 in the ‘Warehouse 51’ in the US desert that houses a cadaver retrieved from a UFO crash.

**2** See Andy Roberts on the Birmingham Space Baby, **FT191:32-38**.

**3** *Scarborough Evening News*, 9 & 10 December 1957.

**4** *FSR* vol 4/4, July-August 1958.

**5** *FSR*, vol 4/6, November-December 1958.

**6** Jenny Randles, *UFO Retrievals*, Blandford, 1996, pp77-82.

**7** *Southern Evening Echo*, 14 May 1959.

**8** Science Museum, Charles Harvard Gibbs-Smith UFO papers, box 3.

**9** *Scarborough Evening News*, 25 Mar 1988.

**10** *Scarborough Evening News*, 12 Feb 2003.

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# The Dürer Stain:

## The *Kreuzwunder* of 1503

In 1503, northern Germany witnessed a series of aerial portents, including blood rains and the appearance of cruciform shapes on the bodies of witnesses. **JEFFREY VALLANCE** recounts how one of the greatest artists of the Renaissance was on hand to record these wonders.

**A**lbrecht Dürer (1471–1528) witnessed a double fortan event in 1503, in his hometown of Nuremberg: a rain of blood causing a crucifixion scene to form on the clothes of a young girl. The artist made a careful drawing of this simulacrum in his sketch-book.

One of the most important and prolific artists of the German Renaissance, Dürer established his reputation and influence as a skilled painter and for his remarkable woodcut prints. His vast body of work also includes engravings, altarpieces, portraits and self-portraits, watercolours, and books.

His most celebrated work, *The Apocalypse* (*Apocalypsis cum Figuris*, 1498), is a series of 15 woodcut print scenes from the Book of Revelation. These prints feature such characters as the Four Horsemen, the Lamb of God, the Whore of Babylon, the Seven-Headed Beast of the Apocalypse, devils, saints and angels. In four of the prints, Dürer depicts rains of blood and fire; prescient, as a few years later he would be an eyewitness to these phenomena. The Apocalypse woodcuts echoed the anxieties of the times, when prophecies of impending doom circulated widely throughout Europe. With these woodcuts, Dürer did something that no artist had done before, producing them on his own and without a wealthy patron. He made large quantities of these prints and sold them at carnivals and fairs – he was the Thomas Kinkade of his day! He sent one full set of prints to Martin Luther.

### BLOOD RAINS AND MIRACULOUS CROSSES

Around the year 1500, a series of bad omens stirred up apocalyptic fervour. The ominous signs included a planetary conjunction, a comet, rumours of war, monstrous births, repeated outbreaks of the plague, and rains of blood. The occurrence of blood rain (or red rain) has been reported since ancient times. The first literary instance is in Homer's *Iliad*, in which Zeus sends a rain of blood



LEFT: Albrecht Dürer, in a 1498 self-portrait. FACING PAGE: One of the scenes from Dürer's *Apocalypse* of the same year.

scopic life forms that can survive for years in a dormant state and can be propagated through outer space from one location to another); volcanic ash (tephra) from an erupting volcano; butterfly droppings; vulture vomit; iron oxide; assorted pollens; and, the most recently favoured explanation, aerial spores from microalgæ. The experts can't agree on how it occurs or which species of algæ produce the red-dish colour; under the microscope, the particles look like corpuscles or vegetable cells and have been identified variously as *Hæmatococcus pluvialis*, *Palmella prodigiosa*, *Protococcus fluvialis* or *Trentepohlia annulata*.

Charles Fort was not convinced by any of the standard explanations. Instead, in *The Book of the Damned*, he suggests that it could be “debris from inter-planetary disasters... Or that there are oceans of blood somewhere

in the sky... Or our whole solar system is a living thing; that showers of blood upon this earth are its internal hæmorrhages.”

In 1503, a rain of blood reportedly fell on scores of people – mostly women – in Germany and the Netherlands, resulting in cruciform shapes forming on their clothing and skin. The phenomenon is known by two terms: *Kreuzregen* (Rain of Crosses) and *Kreuzwunder* (Miracle of the Crosses). It has been suggested that crosses formed when the stain spread out along the weave of the fabric in the clothing or in the recesses of elaborately folded headdresses (*Wulsthaube*), popular with North European women at the time. The ancient St Lambert's Cathedral in Liège preserved several *Kreuzwunder* cloth relics, until the structure was systematically destroyed and the relics ransacked during the French Revolution.

In Nuremberg that same year, a menacing comet glowed overhead as the plague raged through the city. Carts filled with corpses

### *In Nuremberg, a menacing comet glowed overhead as the plague raged*

foretelling impending slaughter in battle. Many have speculated as to the true cause of these sanguineous precipitations. Some explanations suppose that the rain mixes with particles in the atmosphere, like sand from the Sahara Desert or dust from the Arabian peninsula; blood from migratory birds (quails or swallows) that were torn to bits in a violent wind; material from outer space, including exploding meteors or from the tail of a comet; masses of panspermia (micro-

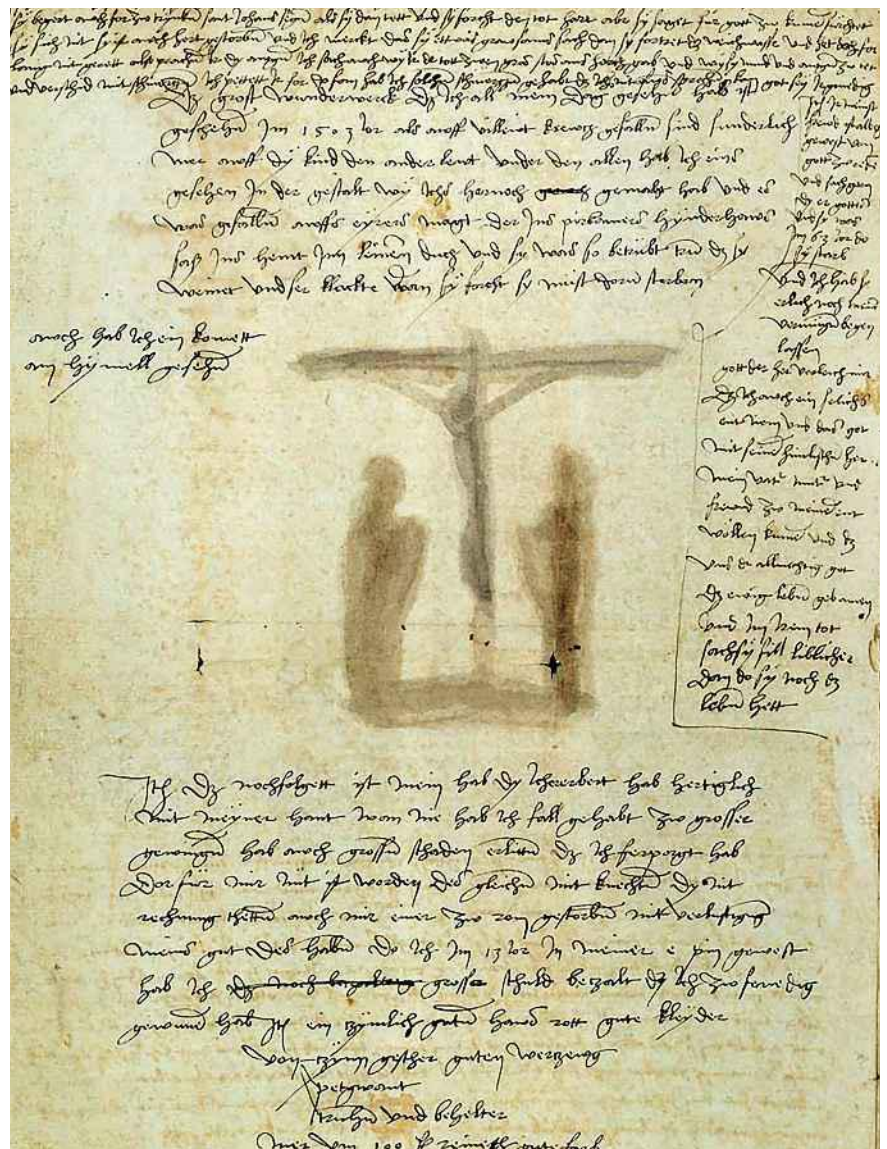
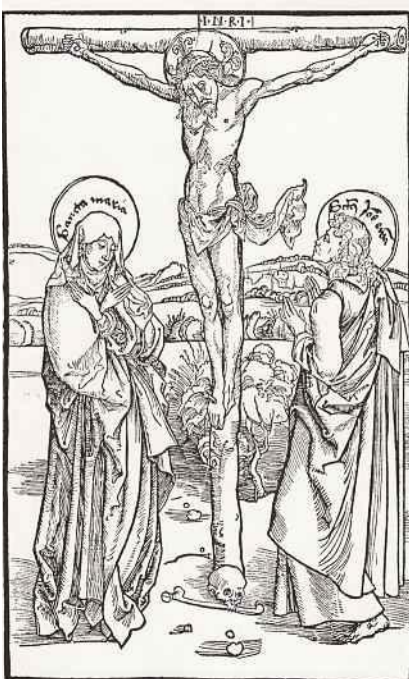






ABOVE: The Kreuzwunder of 1503 depicted on folio 90 of the *Book of Miracles*, published in Augsburg in 1552. BELOW LEFT: Dürer's Crucifixion with the Virgin and Saint John, 1493. BELOW RIGHT: The page from Dürer's *Gedenkbuch* with his ink drawing of the "greatest miracle that I have ever seen in all my days".

rumbled through the streets as blood poured from the sky, calling to mind a ghastly scene from *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, in which the Dead Collector character cries out: "Bring out your dead!" Dürer heard that blood rain had fallen on the clothes of his neighbour's maid, forming a stain in the shape of an entire crucifixion scene. He at once sought her out and made an ink drawing of what he witnessed. He titled this drawing *Miraculous Cross*. In his *Gedenkbuch* (Memorial Book), Dürer wrote: "The greatest miracle that I have ever seen in all my days happened in 1503, when a great many crosses fell." He went on to say the girl was beside herself weeping, fearing that she would surely die.





## CROSS PURPOSES

The symbol of the cross has always been a powerful totemic sign. Before the fourth century, Christians were extremely reticent about portraying the cross openly, as it might expose them to ridicule or danger. In AD 312, on the eve of battle, Roman Emperor Constantine allegedly saw a simulacrum in the shape of a chi-rho cross in the sky over the Sun with the Greek words *Εν Τούτῳ Νίκα*, usually translated into Latin as *in hoc signo vinces* – “in this sign conquer” (see FT275:49). The chi-rho symbol is formed by superimposing the first two letters XP of the Greek word *ΧΡΙΣΤΟΣ* (Christos). The manifestation of Constantine’s vision sounds similar to the atmospheric phenomenon of a parhelion (“sun dog”) consisting of a bright spot next to the Sun, created when light is refracted through ice crystals in the air. This vision, we are told, caused Constantine to convert to Christianity and promote the cross as its symbol. From that time on, warring Christian nations have proclaimed that God is on their side. The Masonic military order of the Red Cross of Constantine still uses the chi-rho as its emblem. A red cross on a white field (termed the Cross of Saint George) is one of the earliest heraldic emblems, dating back to the field signs used during the Crusades to distinguish noble crusaders. The red-on-white cross eventually came to be used by the Knights Templar. In 1190, the emblem was adopted as the crest of the City of London. In the flag used by Protestant churches – a white field with a red cross inside of a blue canton – the shade of red symbolises the blood of Jesus. The symbol of a red cross on a white background is also the logo of the International Red Cross. Under the Geneva Convention, it is to be placed on humanitarian and medical vehicles and buildings, and to be worn by personnel to protect them from military attack on the battlefield. In popular culture, the red cross became the generic emblem for medicine commonly associated with first aid and medical services. (More recently, an identical but green cross has been popularised as the sign for medical marijuana.) The symbol of a cross on a drop of blood is the logo for blood donation. The mascot for Red Cross blood drives is a huge smiling drop of blood with hands and feet saying, “Hi, I’m Billy Blood Drop, but you can call me Billy. My job is to tell you all about blood.” Conversely, the blood-drop-cross badge is the insignia of the heinous white supremacy group the Ku Klux Klan.

## FIRE AND BLOOD

A wonderful woodcut printmaker and contemporary of Dürer, Jörg Glockendon, depicted the array of cruciate images that appeared during the *Kreuzregen*. The cross stain that Dürer documented was the most detailed *Kreuzwunder* ever seen, illustrating an entire crucifixion scene complete with ancillary figures. Traditionally, paintings of the crucifixion commonly feature the Virgin Mary standing on the right side of the cross while St John is positioned on the left. Other



ABOVE: Two woodcuts showing the bloody crosses and symbols of Christ’s passion that appeared on people’s bodies during the *Kreuzregen*.

biblical figures gathered at the cross may include Mary Magdalene in a red cloak, the Roman centurion Longinus (who thrust the Holy Lance into the side of Christ), Joseph of Arimathea catching the blood of Christ in the Holy Grail, Nicodemus (who gave his burial crypt to Christ and helped wrap Him in the Holy Shroud), the sponge-bearer, the two thieves, and the soldiers casting lots at the foot of the Cross. Dürer’s crucifixion simulacrum appears to show Christ hanging limp on the Cross, with the Virgin in a praying stance standing to the left and Longinus holding a lance on the right. During the reign of the *Kreuzwunder*, other symbolism appeared, such as miraculous images of instruments of the Passion of Christ (*Arma Christi*), including the holy hammer and nails, the whip, the crown of thorns, the lance, the sponge on a reed, the seamless garment, dice for casting of lots, the ladder, and the cock that crowed thrice.

It is curious to note that Dürer’s 1493 woodcut *The Crucifixion with the Virgin and St John* is almost identical to his *Miraculous Cross* drawn 10 years later. Each work depicts Christ hanging limply from a crucifix with a shortened stipe. The Virgin (with halo) is praying on the left, while another holy personage stands on the right. When, in 1503, Dürer drew the stain, was he reproducing it exactly as he saw it, or was he subconsciously influenced by the composition of his own earlier drawing?

It was said that of the people who received the marks of the bloody crosses and passion symbols on their clothes during the *Kreuzregen* of 1503, the ones that worshipped the holy images were blessed, while those who cut the stains off their garments were struck dead by live venomous snakes that crawled out from the cloth. Moreover, if the red rain fell directly on exposed skin, the flesh burned like glowing coals. The Benedictine

Monastery of Niederalteich kept a record of such events, noting that the burns caused severe injury that was at times fatal. The Book of Revelation predicts the Apocalypse will include a series of plagues befalling the Earth, including a rain of “fire mixed with blood”, comparable to the burning blood rain. The citizens of Nuremberg feared for their lives from these dreadful signs.

In subsequent searches for the meaning of the falling blood crosses, much emphasis has been put on the concurrent celestial conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter in the constellation of Cancer. According to the astrological manuscripts of the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, the practice of assigning zodiacal signs to correlate with regions of the Earth aided in prognostication. To get to the crux of the matter, the Saturn-Jupiter conjunction foretold an impending invasion by the Ottoman Empire. A pamphlet published in Basel in 1503, written by Libertus, the Bishop Suffragan of Liège, entitled *Interpretation and Significance of the Crosses That Are Now Falling* (*Uslagung vñ Betüttnus der Crutz so yetzo fallen*), recounts a number of *Kreuzwunder*-related phenomena. Libertus came to four conclusions: that the miraculous crosses must be solemnly venerated; that they are signs of God’s wrath against those who oppose the Church; and that God disapproved of provocative dress in women (who were frequently affected). Thus, with Constantine’s militaristic vision of the chi-rho cross directing Christian armies to “in this sign conquer,” Libertus concluded it was God’s will that war be waged against the Turks!

♦♦ JEFFREY VALLANCE is Jeffrey Vallance is an artist, writer, curator, explorer, paranormal experimenter and FT special correspondent. He is the author of *Blinky the Friendly Hen*, *Relics and Reliquaries* and *The Vallance Bible*. He is Visiting Professor in New Genres at UCLA.





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## “There’s a Ghost in My House”

**DEAN BALLINGER** recalls the eccentric musical career and curiously fortean obsessions of the late Mark E Smith

The singular worldview, uncompromising personality, and prodigious work ethic of Mancunian singer Mark E Smith, who died on 24 January aged 60, was responsible for establishing his band The Fall as a cultural institution within the UK music scene. Smith’s creatively chaotic leadership sustained The Fall through an eccentric 40-year career marked by 66 line-up changes, 31 albums, and an international following for their distinctive garage and krautrock infused post-punk.

Although Smith’s predominant persona was that of a Northern working-class provocateur making withering observations on the state of the nation from the confines of his local pub, there were notable fortean dimensions to his life and work. His highly distinctive lyrics, which read like cryptic shards of a *sui generis* Mancunian modernism, often reflected his love of weird fiction by authors well-known for their fortean sensibilities. These included the horror stories of HP Lovecraft, MR James, and Arthur Machen. All three writers’ thematic focus on (in Smith’s words) “the mundane everyday as a backdrop for great terror” inspired many Fall songs: notable examples include ‘Spectre vs Rector’ from 1979’s *Dragnet*, a tale of demonic possession in Hampshire with a ‘chorus’ that directly namechecks MR James alongside Lovecraftian incantations such as ‘yog sothoth’ and references to Roger Corman’s 1960s Poe adaptations; and ‘Last Commands of Xyralothep Via MES’ from the 2003 album *The Real New Fall LP*, in which



Smith portrays himself as a medium channelling sardonic admonitions from the Beyond (“Avoid respectable television and respectable newspapers/ They have neither the talent of art/Or the instinctive snout of the media”).

Philip K Dick’s paranoid sci-fi, with its themes of psychic and temporal dislocation, similarly appealed to fellow speedfreak Smith, spawning songs like the 1983 single ‘Wings’, about a man caught up in ‘time locks’ that cast him adrift across alternate timelines. Smith must also be one of the few songwriters to cite fortean favourite Colin Wilson. ‘Deer Park’, from 1982’s aptly titled *Hex Enduction Hour*, gives a shout-out to Wilson’s first ‘new existentialist’ novel: “Have you been to the English Deer Park?/ It’s a large type artist ranch/This is where C Wilson wrote *Ritual in the Dark*/ Have you been to the English Deer Park?”

Smith’s fortean tastes in literature were complemented by claims that he possessed

psychic abilities. In his mordantly hilarious 2008 autobiography *Renegade*, he describes moonlighting as a Tarot reader to help fund the band in its lean early years. By his own estimation, Smith possessed such innate talent as a cartomancer – “when people did a Tarot with me they’d walk away with their life changed” – that he had to quit the trade after a year or two because clients were becoming too dependent on his readings.

His divinatory powers were, thereafter, presumably diverted into his song-writing. Several Smith associates, particularly his ex-wife Brix (a key member of the band in its mid-80s heyday), have attested to the precognitive dimensions of his lyrics. For instance, in late 1986 The Fall released the *Bend Sinister* album, featuring a song entitled ‘Terry Waite Sez’, about the titular Anglican envoy who acted as a Middle East hostage negotiator. The focus on Waite would have been taken as a typical piece of Smithian satire were it not for

the fact that Waite was himself kidnapped and held hostage shortly after the album’s release, leading to speculation that the song was a coded prediction of one of the major news stories of 1987. Similar conjecture surrounded the song ‘Powder Keg’ from the 1996 album *The Light User Syndrome*. Lyrics such as “I had a dream/Bruised and coloured/It’s going to hurt me/ Manchester city centre” struck many listeners as prescient of the IRA bombing of central Manchester that occurred on 15 of June that year, five days after the album was released. The ‘psychic rock band’ angle was too good for tabloids such as the *Sun* and the *Daily Star* to ignore, resulting in Smith officially responding to their investigations with the rejoinder “Well, I’m a fucking psychic, fuck off”.

These hacks were fortunate to escape ‘the curse of The Fall’ that Smith allegedly cast upon errant scribes. In the 2008 book *The Fallen*, a quixotic attempt to track down all of the Fall’s then ex-members, music journalist Dave Simpson relates Brix’s account of a reporter who was hexed and injured two days later when the phone booth he was in was hit by a car. Simpson surmises that he has been similarly jinxed when he outlines the litany of personal misfortunes – a car accident, food poisoning, and the break-up of his long-term relationship – that occurred at the conclusion of his investigations.

A knotty and mercurial character, Smith can be remembered as a musical ‘outsider’ whose creativity operated in those liminal zones of culture where forteana also lurks. Realm of dusk...

♦♦ **DEAN BALLINGER** is a tutor at the University of Waikato in Hamilton, New Zealand. His favourite Fall album is 1984’s *The Wonderful And Frightening World Of...*



## Sacred geometry of the VW Polo

**RYAN SHIRLOW** goes in search of esoteric meanings and hidden codes in his ageing family car...

**F**ortean takes a certain pleasure in the discovery of hidden relationships between disparate phenomena. Some we attribute to blind chance, but others we suspect are the work of people or processes we can at least attempt to understand.

The search for pattern and meaning is an important one, to which our brains are finely tuned. But what happens when this search overextends itself, and we see significance where none exists?

This tendency is known as pareidolia. We most commonly experience it when mundane images bring to mind something unusual: cats that look like Hitler, the infamous Face on Mars, the faces in trees or fence panels to be found in this very magazine's 'Simulacra Corner'.<sup>1</sup>

But pareidolia can also be caused by any stimulus of a suitably complex or random nature. If you spend hours listening to recordings of ghostly static, you may experience Electronic Voice Phenomena (see **FT104:26-30, 194:26-30**).<sup>2</sup> And if you devote enough time to poring over a map of ancient monuments, perhaps mysterious alignments will appear.

So profound is this tendency that even in the absence of any external input our brains still try to detect meaningful patterns. People who suffer from 'Charles Bonnet Syndrome' report terrifying hallucinations as the visual centres of their brain fill in the gaps in their damaged eyesight (see **FT125:14, 184:46-49, 321:54-55**).<sup>3</sup> There are even structured and musical forms of tinnitus reported by people



RYAN SHIRLOW

ABOVE: It's easy to be swept away by the dramatic lines and elegant proportions of the 'humble' Volkswagen Polo.

### *Conspiracy theory is a type of political pareidolia*

with hearing loss (see **FT300:24, 361:22**).

Pareidolia could even be at the heart of any number of paranormal experiences: from misinterpreted shadowy figures, to lights seen in the sky, to apparently significant coincidences. It may be that it stymies our attempts to analyse aggregated data, forming disconnected reports into apparently meaningful 'flaps' or 'window areas'. I believe modern day conspiracy theory is a kind of *political pareidolia*: the search for meaning hidden in the noise of 21st century governance. Pseudoscience, alternative history and the New Age all rely on this instinctive analysis of poorly structured and contradictory data. Enthusiasts randomly divide or multiply dates and measurements by one another

in the search for significance, a practice known as numerology or – when applied to art and architecture – 'Sacred Geometry'.

At the heart of Sacred Geometry is a tangible core of real mathematics. Pi or the Fibonacci Sequence<sup>4</sup> are fundamental relationships which exist in nature and which have been emulated by artists and engineers since ancient times. But numbers can also be abused by quack academics, who construct tenuous links between unproven hypotheses, cynically parsing the data to prove their pet theories.<sup>5</sup>

To showcase this kind of analytical pareidolia at work, I decided to write a short piece about an object so utterly banal that no mystical art could possibly have been employed in its design. I chose my 1993 Mark2F Volkswagen Polo.

By the simple technique of starting with what I wanted to find and working back to the evidence, I exceeded my worst expectations.

My search began with the famous 'Golden Ratio', which appears time and again in mathematics, biology and art

(Leonardo Da Vinci was a fan). It can be expressed numerically as 1.618:1.<sup>6</sup>

The length of the first third of my car, when compared to the height at its very front, closely matches this Golden value. Clearly the designer had intended to catch my attention. Perhaps, as befits a car designed in Protestant Germany and built in Catholic Spain, my Polo is imbued with further Christian significance.

Clad in Virginal white, she is fitted with four steel wheels, each one representing a Gospel of the New Testament. One "measures a circle beginning anywhere", as Charles Fort wrote in *Lo!*, but on this model the diameter of the wheel is 13in – a troubling figure in the Western Christian tradition, bringing to mind the 12 disciples and the traitor Judas Iscariot. This is no mere coincidence, for the engine also boasts four cylinders, and a capacity of 1.3 litres.

I sketched out approximate measurements of the car's other dimensions; being approximate is good, because it allows you to bend the results to fit your chosen thesis.



ratio appeared again and again: 1.3:1. This is the ratio of the length of the roof to its width. It is the height of the car divided by the distance to the bottom of the rear window. It is the depth of the bonnet to the width at its midpoint. What could it mean?

And how could the ancient Germans, working as they were, in the 1980s, with the basic computers of that era, have executed such a complex design, laden with religious and mathematical significance?

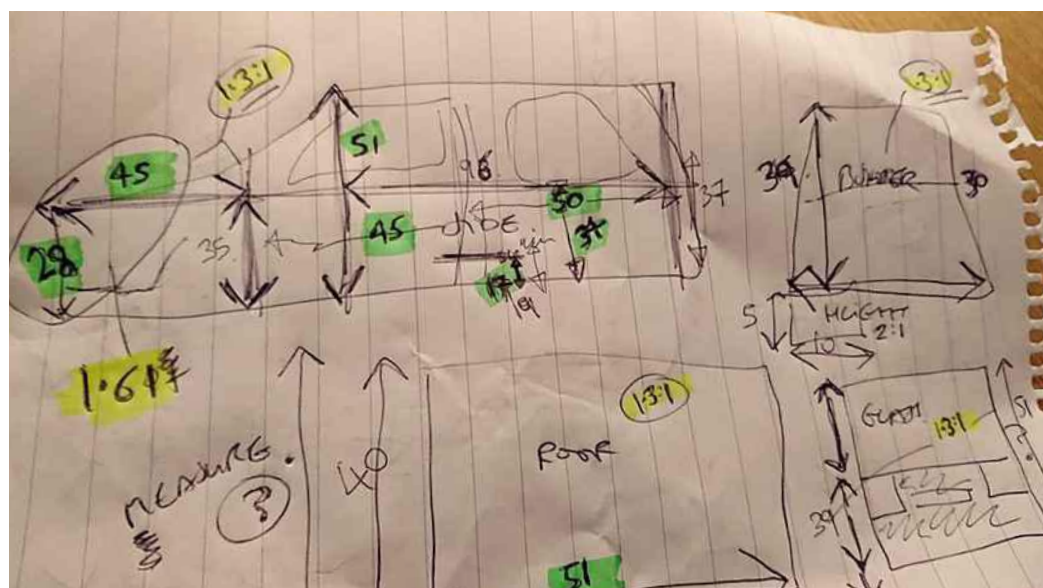
The answer is they could not – at least, *not alone*...

I had set out to cynically demonstrate how random facts about my car could be mashed together to produce ludicrous assertions. Instead, I had uncovered arcane revelations hidden in plain sight.

We must face up to the inescapable conclusion that my Polo was built to express secret, occult knowledge. But was it designed with the assistance of nefarious Freemasons, divine Angels, or beings from outer space? *And what were they trying to tell us?*

## NOTES

- 1** See [www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-22686500](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-22686500) for a useful summary of pareidolia.
- 2** For a skeptical view, see [www.csicop.org/si/show/where\\_is\\_the\\_science\\_in\\_electronic\\_voice\\_phenomena](http://www.csicop.org/si/show/where_is_the_science_in_electronic_voice_phenomena)
- 3** See [www.visionaware.org/info/your-eye-condition/guide-to-eye-conditions/charles-bonnet-syndrome/124](http://www.visionaware.org/info/your-eye-condition/guide-to-eye-conditions/charles-bonnet-syndrome/124).
- 4** Each number in the Fibonacci Sequence is the sum of the two previous numbers i.e. 1,1,2,3,5,8,13...
- 5** Anything regarding the planet Nibiru is a prime example: <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/2017/09/world-end-biblical-doomsday-nibiru-september-23-science/>
- 6** The ratio was first described as 'Golden' by German astronomer Johannes Kepler.
- 7** [www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-85/how-arianism-almost-world.html](http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-85/how-arianism-almost-world.html)
- 8** [www.spiegel.de/international/germany/the-truth-about-88-new-book-reveals-secret-meaning-of-neo-nazi-codes-a-770820.html](http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/the-truth-about-88-new-book-reveals-secret-meaning-of-neo-nazi-codes-a-770820.html)



**TOP:** The birth of the 'People's Car'. Does the innocent-looking Polo hide dark Nazi symbols? **ABOVE:** Good fortune tellers should always keep clear and detailed notes. These may help in later evaluation, whether of the legal or psychiatric kind...

My Polo, it transpires, is roughly divided into thirds across much of its form: the height from the ground to the side trim, from the trim to the window, and from the window to the roof – the closest point of the car to Heaven. The same pattern can be found from the bumper to the windscreen, from there back to the trailing edge of the door, and from there a *slightly larger* third to the rear of the car. Was the designer daring to imply that one part of this Trinity is greater

than the others? Might the larger third of my vehicle represent the primacy of God the Father, in a clear reference to the fourth century heresy of Arianism?<sup>7</sup>


It is good technique to simply ask such a question, then move quickly on. We will consider the matter proven.

These days, no stream of alternative consciousness is complete without invoking Hitler or the Nazis. Remember, the original Volkswagen was a project of Nazi Germany – the

original People's Car. Openly fascist symbols such as the swastika are now banned in that country, so right-wing groups use more coded symbolism.<sup>8</sup> Might we find evidence of these dark forces behind the Polo's dynamic styling?

I was relieved when I could not. There was no suggestion of the number 88 (i.e., 'HH' or 'Heil Hitler') in the design. This confirmed my belief that the Polo's designer was pure of heart.

Elsewhere, another mysterious

 **RYAN SHIRLOW** is a musician and occasional writer, currently working undercover as a civil servant and father of two.



# THE HIEROPHANT'S APPRENTICE PRESENTS BUILDING A FORTEAN LIBRARY

## 30. PHEW! WHAT A SCORCHER!

There is something so bizarre and implausible, even slightly mad, about the notion of spontaneous human combustion that it tends to bring on embarrassed titters when mentioned in polite company – and something rather more robust than brazen mirth among coarser companions. And it has to be said that this grisly phenomenon does hold the potential for grotesque comedy. That paragon of reliable journalism, the *Weekly World News*, took due advantage of this in its “completely verifiable” report of 18 November 1986:

### PREACHER EXPLODES DURING SERMON

*Horrified congregation sees evangelist blow up in the pulpit*

– and assures us not only that at the time “Pastor Lüger” was warning his flock that “they were headed for the blazing inferno of Hell” but that “not a single page” of the Bible he was holding (thumping?) “was so much as singed.” A fiery sermon indeed. One is almost surprised that the late Revd Dr Ian Paisley lived as long as he did without suffering such an acausal meaningful coincidence to accompany his habitually incendiary rhetoric. There are rather more serious accounts and analyses in the books we discuss here, though that doesn’t preclude a leavening of madness...

There is certainly a touch of madness about the late Michael Harrison’s *Fire from Heaven* (1976), the first full-length treatment of the subject. Harrison was convinced that spontaneous human combustion (SHC) is real, and is a manifestation of “the paranormal”; and that all paranormal phenomena are somehow connected, aspects of one another. This led him to adduce such heterogeneous matters as the Egryn Lights of 1905, cattle mutilations, the ‘slow vaulting’ of dancer Vaslav Nijinsky, dowsing, the séance-room exploits of Nina Kulagina, Florence Cook and Eusapia Palladino, the 1908 Tunguska fireball, the prophets Ezekiel, Jeremiah and Elijah, poltergeists, telekinesis and psychokinesis, *idiot savants*, the ‘etheric body’, and the human aura as detected by Kirlian photography. He even manages to squeeze in a passing mention of UFOs and another of astrology. A certain “Mr Robert Rickard” is severely ticked off for “unscientific arrogance” for having questioned Harrison’s claim that certain SHC sites are linked by the sound of the *first syllable* of their names. Harrison continually rails, even rages, against the arrogance, closed-mindedness and blindness of science throughout, by the way, and it gets old real fast. Devotees of ‘ley lines’ should be pissed off that ‘earth energies’ don’t get a look in. *Chakras* and *kundalini* energy are likewise ignored, though yoga features briefly.

We first read this strange book some

decades ago in its original edition, and before re-reading the 1990 revision for this piece had forgotten almost everything about it except the description of Nijinsky’s ‘slow vaulting’. Apparently, the dancer would (as ballet dancers do) leap high into the air – but then float slow and stately down. Whether illusion or reality (Harrison has a long footnote ascribing the feat to others as well), the phenomenon is indubitably intriguing, and it’s left unexplained – as is its connection to SHC. Anyone know more?

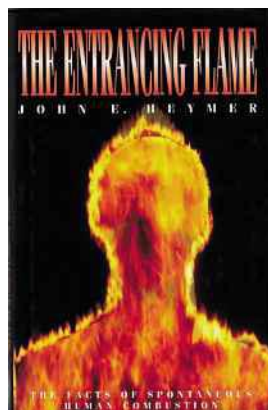
The scatter-brained, prolix mishmash that is *Fire from Heaven* is certainly entertaining – gripping, even, if you buy his premisses – and has a good sample of the usual suspects among SHC victims. But it’s not what we’d call authoritative. Nor is another full-length book on SHC, Larry Arnold’s *Ablaze!* (1995). While this introduces us to some new alleged cases, Arnold rather lets himself down by inventing – he might call it deducing – a hitherto (and since) unheard-of subatomic particle, the ‘pyrotron’, that vaporises people through a sub-atomic chain reaction. Jenny Randles’s and Peter Hough’s earlier *Spontaneous Human Combustion* (1992) indulges too in half a

dozen chapters of theorising. These – not always best focused – cover body chemistry, body electricity, lightning strikes, balls of fire (which perhaps inevitably veers into UFOs, including the Cash-Landrum case), force fields (which lures them into the well-debunked *Philadelphia* experiment) and *kundalini* energy. The relevance of some of this isn’t always obvious, and they apply the term SHC to cows and rabbits – which is confusing, to say the least. But wisely they refrain from plumping for any particular mechanism behind SHC. The book’s great virtues are that it’s packed with case histories, many the result of the authors’ original and industrious research, and they are – available information permitting – scrupulously analysed. A prime example is their treatment of the apparent survivor of SHC, Jack Angel; a case which, on examination, turns out to be more than somewhat ambiguous.

The outstanding book on SHC is John E Heymer’s *The Entrancing Flame* (1996).

Heymer was, as he says, the first author on the subject who “had the double advantage of having witnessed the aftermath of such an occurrence while also being a forensically trained investigator.” He was also an autodidact of encyclopædic erudition. With some vehemence he trundles out the standard SHC author’s denunciations of the wilful obtuseness of coroners, and the incompetence or cowardice of scientists.

But he balances that by explaining exactly where coroners have dishonestly ignored awkward evidence and limits his criticism of science to the scientists who reject the notion of SHC out of hand, and who’ve tried, and generally failed, to demonstrate their beloved ‘wick effect’. And he rejects (you can almost *hear* his eyes rolling) paranormal and ‘supernatural’ approaches to SHC, insisting that any eventual explanation for it will be entirely within the bounds of natural laws. He arrived at this outlook by an idiosyncratic route: he says that in his early teens he read the Bible





right through, didn't believe a word of it, and became an atheist. From that position he rejects all things supernatural and, one suspects, immaterial. Not sure Aristotle would approve the logic of this, but it saves Heymer's readers from Michael-Harrison-style panoplies of quasi-mystical relations among everything and nothing.

Heymer spent a quarter-century in the Gwent (Wales) police, and a fair proportion of those years as a scenes-of-crime officer. In 1980, he concluded he'd seen his first case of SHC after he was called to look over the corpse of Henry Thomas, or what was left of it. The salient points of the scene were that the room was virtually airtight, some plastic fittings were melted, and only the chair in which Thomas had sat was burned. Henry Thomas himself was essentially a mass of ash – including the bones, which had turned to white powder. His skull was a shrunken, blackened mass. And: "Lying on the carpet between the ashes and the shoes was a *pair of male human feet clothed in socks* [his emphasis]. The undamaged feet protruded from short lengths of trouser leg bottoms... The remains of the trouser legs had a thin, charred edge, as if cut by a laser beam. The transition from undamaged cloth to ash was immediate..." Fresh kindling had been placed in the hearth, suggesting the fire hadn't been lit when Thomas burst into flame – and he was anyway a couple of feet from it. And Thomas didn't smoke. There was a greasy, glutinous deposit all over the room. It was a classic SHC scene.

There was one humorous aspect: forensic scientists found a bit of skin on the grate, which they reckoned had been scraped off Thomas's forehead when he fell into the fire and caught light. It turned out, on analysis, to be bovine skin. Hearing this, Heymer's superintendent remarked wryly: "So, it seems, John, that there was this passing cow..." Adding to the general bemusement was the discovery on post-mortem examination that the state of some of his tissues showed that Henry Thomas was *still alive* when he started to burn. Which raises the question: why didn't he do something about it? Heymer's conclusion, after examining the literature, is that SHC victims fall into a trance

"GENERALLY  
SPEAKING,  
BOOKS DON'T  
CAUSE MUCH  
HARM. EXCEPT  
WHEN YOU  
READ THEM,  
THAT IS. THEN  
THEY CAUSE  
ALL KINDS OF  
PROBLEMS."

*Pseudonymous Bosch*

before the fire takes hold – hence the title of his book. The classic explanation was that SHC favoured persons who were not exactly strangers to the grape (Dickens uses the trope in *Bleak House*), and were consequently too besotted to know what was happening to them. Heymer debunks this one along the way, as well as the oft-repeated claim that SHC victims are always fat, elderly females.

If apparent SHC victims aren't in a trance, or habitually slewed, and the famous 'wick effect' is the true cause of their demise, this lack of reaction is peculiar. Brian Dunning ('The Skeptoid') explains the wick effect thus: "The flame on a candle's wick is small, but its temperature is very hot; thus it has a powerful melting effect within its tiny sphere of influence. This melts the wax into liquid, which is drawn up the wick, where it vaporises and burns. The wick itself does not burn due to the cooling effect of the vaporisation; but once the wax is gone, the wick burns away as well." This assumes that the victim's clothing is set on fire by an external source, such as a hot coal (and the victim snoozes on). The fire heats the body, the body fat melts and

drips out of the body onto the clothing, which then acts like the wick of a candle, until the body fat is consumed. This should also explain why the surroundings remain unburned, although the heat is intense enough to melt plastic fittings. And there is the whole problem of how victims' bones are reduced to white ash, which is more than crematoria can manage. Even if one has a less than committed view of the reality of SHC, debunkers ought to have addressed these little local difficulties with their blanket explanations. And they haven't. As Heymer takes some pleasure in pointing out, the demonstrations of the wick effect for various television documentaries have been dismal failures (he reserves as much exasperated ire for TV producers as he does for intransigent coroners).

Perhaps the most compelling case Heymer makes for SHC is that of a character known only as "the tramp Bailey" (pictured above). Bailey was found at the bottom of the stairs in a derelict house in Lambeth, south London, with a jet of blue flame issuing "at force" from a 4in (10cm)-wide slit in his abdomen. Bailey *had* reacted to that: his jaws were sunk into the newel post from the pain. His right hand was burnt away. He was known to be a meths drinker, but no trace of any possible source of ignition was nearby – only grand houses have fireplaces in the hall, and anyway gas and electricity supplies had been cut off – or on his person; and he was known not to smoke. Floor, stairs, and newel post were scorched. It seems Bailey died from asphyxiation from his own fire fumes. As Heymer notes, sceptics dedicated to the 'wick effect' are most careful to avoid this case.

Heymer produces an hypothesis that SHC – which by definition starts within the body – is caused by malfunctioning mitochondria. We're not competent to judge that, but it's also noticeable that debunkers haven't either. Not that debunkers are always implausible, even if they can be snobs, for instance about Larry Arnold's day-job as a bus driver. The Committee for Skeptical Inquiry website ([www.csicop.com](http://www.csicop.com)) has plenty of their own objections to SHC. John Heymer's book remains a fine monument to the proposition that there's something – just something very odd and unexplained – to these gruesome conflagrations.

Michael Harrison, *Fire from Heaven*, Sidwick & Jackson, 1976; Skoob Books, revised and expanded edition, 1990.

Larry Arnold, *Ablaze!*, M Evans & Co, 1995.

Jenny Randles and Peter Hough, *Spontaneous Human Combustion*, Robert Hale, 1992.

John E Heymer, *The Entrancing Flame*, Little, Brown & Co, 1996.



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## The Compleat Ufologist writes...

Three reissued books by astronomer, novelist, computer scientist, venture capitalist and ufologist Jacques Vallee show his life-long curiosity about UFOs and his distrust of the extraterrestrial hypothesis

### Forbidden Science 1

#### A Passion for Discovery

Jacques Vallee

Anomalist Books 2017

Pb, 489pp, illus, notes, ind., \$22.95, ISBN 9781938398766

### Forbidden Science 2

#### California Hermetica

Jacques Vallee

Anomalist Books 2017

Pb, 547pp, illus, notes, ind., \$22.95, ISBN 9781938398773

### Forbidden Science 3

#### On the Trail of Hidden Truths

Jacques Vallee

Anomalist Books 2017

Pb, 513pp, illus, notes, ind., \$22.95, ISBN 9781938398780

It's something like a miracle – if not of the supernatural variety, of the kind that governs strength and determination – that these three volumes, newly reprinted in trade paperback from their original editions in 1992, 2008, and 2012, exist at all.

Each of these self-identified 'Journals of Jacques Vallee' covers a period of his life (1957–1969, 1970–1979, 1980–1989 respectively). They don't amount to a day-by-day chronicle, but close enough, and they don't, I'm sure, only because even someone whose life has been as eventful as Vallee's has quiet moments. Still, you'll know a whole lot about his assorted lives – ufologist most famously to the *FT* audience but also astronomer and novelist, followed by computer scientist and venture capitalist. He is candid about most things, from his assessment of colleagues (sometimes withering) to, yes, his sex life. His love of his wife Janine (deceased) and two children is a consistent and touching theme.

No single reader, short of

a future biographer, will find everything here of uniform interest, and sometimes pages of material may go by of sufficiently modest hold on the attention that the less-engaged consumer may lose track of the action.

Even so, anyone who has more than a passing familiarity with this remarkable man will be grateful for the labours that went into these books, written, Vallee says, for friends and colleagues, not for a general audience. Reading them, you are likely to reflect that the last thing you would want to do at the end of an energy-draining day on the job is to sit down and record what happened to you since you woke up. One doesn't know whether it's discipline or self-absorption, or a combination of both – surely, a conviction that what one is doing matters – that fuels such enterprise (not just by Vallee but by everybody from Pepys to Boswell to Henry Adams and more). History is in their debt, and the history that concerns ufology will long honour what Vallee has done here, even aside from *Passport to Magonia* (1969) and his other influential, debate-fuelling treatises on ufology.

"Although they contain passages that are personal and some that are painful," Vallee writes in the introduction to the first volume, "they also provide a primary source about a crucial fact in the recent historical record: the appearance of new classes of phenomena that highlight the reality of the paranormal." In his work he was fortunate to be close to two leading ufologist-intellectuals, Aimé Michel and J Allen Hynek, clearer thinkers than most who sought to engage with the UFO phenomenon, yet ultimately ended up, like nearly everybody

*"In 1955, Vallee and his mother spotted a 'grey, metallic disc' hovering over a local church"*

else, confused by it and driven to conflicting – evolving, to put it another way – interpretations. What matters is that they kept thinking, kept opening themselves to new ideas and fresh evidence.

Born in Pontoise, France, in 1939, the young Vallee grew interested in UFOs during the celebrated autumn 1954 French wave. One Sunday in May 1955 he and his mother sighted a "gray, metallic disc with a clear bubble on top" hovering silently above a local church. Since 1947 such daylight discs have been at the core of ufology's extraterrestrial hypothesis (ETH), of which Vallee has been a longtime, determined critic. Even if you didn't know that, these three volumes would let you know as much, repeatedly. Single-handedly (well, with some assistance from the, er, less intellectually disciplined John Keel), he turned the ETH into a heresy within much of ufology, with mixed consequences, some fortuitous, some frankly nuts. I'll give Vallee the credit for the former.

After a period at the Paris Observatory, Vallee transferred to Austin, Texas, to be employed at MacDonald Observatory, from there to move on to Chicago almost a year later, in November 1962. There, he developed computer programs

for Northwestern University, whose astronomy department J Allen Hynek headed. Hynek was also Project Blue Book's scientific consultant. With the occasional muted dissent, he parroted the US Air Force line, which may be summarised as "Nothing to see here, folks, move along." Vallee spoke to Hynek's doubts about what his sponsors were doing, or more precisely not doing, about UFO reports. Eventually, as most reading these words know, Hynek shook off his timidity and advocated UFO study until his death in 1986.

A good part of the joy of these books is the portrayal of Hynek, whom Vallee captures perfectly. Anyone who knew him – as I did, though Vallee far better – will recognise the very human, likable, sometimes bumbling man described here. Vallee continually expresses frustration with him (an occupational

hazard of being around the man) but never gives up on him or ceases judging him lovable through it all. For all his limitations, Hynek is likely to end up a historic figure for his role as an accomplished astronomer

who risked all to champion the UFO phenomenon in the face of opposition and ridicule from colleagues, prominently including the noxious celebrity and careerist Carl Sagan.

Vallee's odyssey resists neat summary, which I won't attempt. Suffice it to say he has lived in the Bay Area (San Francisco and suburbs) for many years while retaining strong French ties. He has written books focused on ufology and computer science as well as science fiction, and he has distinguished himself as an innovative, admired figure





# Sweet Fanny Adams...

The *IPN* built a massive circulation by feeding the British public tales of butchery and depravity, shown here in their blood-spattered glory

## Victorian Murders

Jan Bondeson

Amberley Publishing

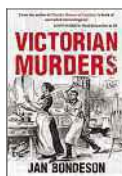
Pb, 320pp, illus, bib, ind, £14.99, ISBN 9781445666303

Sometimes, the shock of the old can be as jaw-dropping as any of today's rolling news atrocities. Taking a tour through the *Illustrated Police News* archive from the end of the Victorian era between 1867 and 1900, Jan Bondeson starts in such a place. This august organ, described by the author as "a sensationalist, populist, xenophobic and racist newspaper" gained a massive readership thanks to the wealth of dramatic and macabre engravings that accompanied each of its terrible true life tales, all rendered by artists highly skilled at catching the very moment of death and dismemberment.

Though 151 years and a falsely attributed but persistent vulgarity separates us from her, the death of Sweet Fanny Adams opens this collection on its most horrific and haunting note, containing as it does, all the elements of Grimm fairytale and worst nightmare. While taking a stroll across meadows surrounding the small Hampshire town of Alton, this eight-year-old girl, her younger sister Lizzie and their friend Minnie were approached by a young man called Frederick Baker, a neatly dressed solicitor's clerk who had always been friendly with the children in the past, giving them pennies for sweets. On the fateful Saturday of 24 August 1867 he dispensed coppers as was his custom, and stood for a while, watching the trio play and pick berries. Then,

as Bondeson chillingly reports: "he suddenly and wordlessly picked Fanny Adams up and made off with her". What he did to that child in the woods beyond the sunlit meadows might even trouble the modern horror movie director to have to depict. The revulsion and rage that followed him to the Winchester county scaffold in the form of a crowd of 6,000 – rendered by the *IPN* illustrator, in an engraving that resembles an Edward Gorey plate, as a veritable sea of souls stretching far into the horizon – still resonates.

Tales of butchery and depravity involving women and children turn the following



monochrome pages red all over. A lot of them contain similar dread elements – a schoolboy set upon and beheaded by a stranger on a quiet country lane in Somerset; pieces of

human flesh dispensed across the city of Norwich, its sewers and wastelands; parts of a seven-year-old girl sniffed down from a chimney in Blackburn by a bloodhound. Often, it doesn't stop with an individual. "What would it take for a German to qualify for the *IPN*?" muses Bondeson, "would he have to murder his entire family? Well – rather!" Timm Thode, who dispatched his parents, four brothers, sister and a servant girl with a 5ft handspoke and a hatchet, pausing to hang a watchdog

from a tree before piling their bodies into a barn and setting fire to them, is one of a handful of such 'family tragedies' Bondeson considers, noting that they were far from uncommon in the days before family planning and that, "in the absence of

firearms or noxious gases for the murderer to make use of, sometimes led to the grossest scenes". The 1870 Denham Massacre is a particularly chilling and rare example of such a crime being carried out by a stranger, in this case a family of seven beaten to death by a passing, opportunist villain-of-the-road.

Being an equal-opportunities employer, death can of course be administered by female hand too, and Bondeson has collected several notable specimens of twisted sisterhood. Spurned chocolate poisoner Christina Edmunds deployed a certain amount of sly cunning; disgruntled servants Marguerite Dixblanc and Kate Webster sheer brute force; while the unsolved Great Bravo murder of 1876 revolved around two women who were perhaps too wily to be hanged. And are certain streets cursed by the shadow of the scythe? However desirable the locale of Hackney has become in recent years, estate agents looking to sell a little des res on Amhurst Road would be advised not to leave this book lying around.

Of all the themes that run through this tome, though, perhaps the most persistent spectres are those warned of by Dickens in his most celebrated ghost story – ignorance and want. Despite all the scientific, artistic and social progress made in this era, the grinding poverty and class divisions of Victorian society have a hand in almost every crime recorded by the *IPN*. Fortunately, in Jan Bondeson we have a writer whose forensic eye for detail and formidable dark humour can keep the modern reader's eye on the page throughout these dark passages in time, while reminding them that we may not have made such progress as we like to think.

Cathi Unsworth



in all of them. He may be the single most intelligent human being to direct his attention to the UFO question. He has also mingled with occultists and parapsychologists (not the same, except in 'rationalist' literature), while acknowledging that the former at least have nothing to tell us about UFOs.

It does not follow, it ought not to be necessary to observe, that he's right about everything, just that he merits respectful attention. No one can, or would want to, dispute the proposition that he has changed serious thinking about the phenomenon. Reading these and others of his books, however, one wishes that he were friendlier and fairer to colleagues, all but a very few of whom (mostly personal friends) he treats as dunces. Not that there isn't an unsettling number of dunces out there. As the author of a multivolume history of the UFO controversy, I believe I have read all of them. There have been occasions I feared for my sanity.

Still, in just about any human enterprise it's the best, not the worst, that matters. In the course of time, if UFOs turn out to be what they appear (extraordinary anomalies, whether ET or otherwise, or maybe ET and otherwise), future scientists and scholars will heed the most lucid writing and research by ufologists; the rest won't matter except as a footnote in social history. Having interacted with UFO people nearly all of my life, I can attest to the presence of some impressively astute individuals with a fully functioning critical intelligence. I may not always have agreed with them, but I have understood what they were thinking and what they were doing, and why.

It is no social crime to be wrong. It is, though, to be stupidly wrong, in other words, to hold fast to an initially promising or puzzling notion well past its sell-by date (e.g. crashed saucers, UFO-centric history). While his criticisms can fall sharply on target, at other times Vallee seems more offended by those who disagree with him than willing to hear them out. That frustration, which in the past led me to write several impatient critiques, returned to mind when I read his treatment of the Center for





UFO Studies, with which I was associated and whose approach Vallee misunderstands and misrepresents sufficiently that, prior to preparing this review, I wrote him to complain. (I want to stress that Vallee and I are personally cordial and broadly in agreement, though – a fundamental difference between him and me – he is not a fortean.)

All of which is to say Vallee has a point of view, to which he is entitled, but if eminently worth our ear, it is not the only one possible under the circumstances. As with all who dare to voice opinions about issues defined by profound uncertainty, his truth is his, and it should not be mistaken for everybody's. As you read these brilliant, necessary, and occasionally infuriating books, though, you can thank Jacques Vallee for forcing all of us to think harder about this enduring enigma of our age.

Jerome Clark

★★★★★

## The Witch

**A History of Fear from Ancient Times to the Present**

Ronald Hutton

Yale 2017

Hb, 360pp, plates, notes, ind, £25.00, ISBN 9780300229042

*The Witch* is a very different book from Ronald Hutton's usual output. Most of the popular Bristol historian's previous work is aimed at an intelligent non-specialist audience; *The Witch* is, in contrast, an uncompromising academic text.

Hutton explains clearly in his introduction what the book is – and isn't – about. It's not about modern-day Pagan witches. It's not about wise women or cunning men, the people in a village who would give you a love-charm or a healing or a blessing, or help with your childbirth. It's quite specifically and only about those people who do harm (or rather, are thought to do harm) by magical means. And so, as Hutton's books often are, it's more about how a group of people are perceived rather than about how they actually are. (The *Spectator* reviewer perhaps missed the Introduction where Hutton explains this; he

presumes to inform Hutton about evidence that real witches were wise women who had visions from fly agaric mushrooms and ergot!) For this book, wise people, cunning folk, medicine men, traditional healers – people who “provide magical services for clients” – Hutton calls “service magicians”; and it isn't about them.

Much of the book is a very detailed comparison of what previous historians and anthropologists have said about witches as people who do harm – something of an academic literature survey. Changes in academic fashion have meant a shift away from exploring ideas about witchcraft from anthropology, folklore and ancient history in the last half century, at least amongst English-speaking scholars, though some Continental scholars have maintained this approach. In *The Witch* Hutton seeks to look at what can be learned from both approaches.

His book begins with a global comparison, based on ethnographic studies, of attitudes to malefic witchcraft in the non-European world, then in ancient Europe and the Near East, before asking whether shamanic traditions had any influence on beliefs in magic and witchcraft. The second section looks at the mediæval European background to the witch trials we're all familiar with, and asks how local traditions affected those trials. It explores the influence of ceremonial magic – a very different thing from witchcraft, though in the early modern period they were sometimes conflated, leading to a development of ideas about

witchcraft and to the stereotype of the “satanic witch”.

In the final section the book comes more alive as Hutton focuses on Britain, and on more recent

scholarship into the witch trials. One chapter looks at British beliefs in fairies, and whether this has any effect on belief in malevolent witches. If an accused witch spoke of her relationships with fairies (or “good neighbours”), this was sometimes interpreted by the magistrates as making a pact with a demon, to the witch's detriment.

There's a clear dividing line

between England and lowland Scotland, which had many witch trials, and the Scottish Highlands, the Western Isles, Ireland, the Isle of Man and Wales – the Celtic areas of Britain – which had very few. Hutton finds a stronger belief in the Celtic areas in malevolent fairies rather than witches – and also a culture where disagreements are sorted out with reparation rather than punishment.

Continental witches don't tend to have animal familiars, but English witches do, at least from Tudor times, and the final chapter explores this difference. By the 17th century belief in “the keeping of demons in bestial form and a pet-like relationship” led to a search for a witch-mark or teat used by the witch to suckle her familiar.

Witches (in the sense that Hutton is studying them in this book) are, he points out, largely created by their opponents. And his book, though focusing almost entirely on the harmful view of the witch, is “not designed to restore that fear and hatred but to annihilate them, by providing a better understanding of the roots of belief in such a figure”. Through a blending of history, anthropology and folklore, he succeeds in doing that.

David V Barrett

★★★★★

## Cryptid Cinema

**Meditations on Bigfoot, Bayou Beasts and Backwoods Boogiemen of the Movies**

Stephen R. Bissette

Spiderbaby Graftix 2017

Pb, 245pp, illus, £18.82, ISBN 9781975938130

Stephen R Bissette, illustrator of the DC horror comic *Swamp Thing*, the Bigfoot-themed novel *The Mountain King* and *The Vermont Monster Guide*, is no stranger to cryptids. *Cryptid Cinema: Meditations on Bigfoot, Bayou Beasts and Backwoods Boogiemen of the Movies* is a refreshingly informal study of well-known and obscure cryptids lurking on the silver screen.

This well-researched and enlightening initial instalment – *Cryptid Cinema* is the first in a proposed cryptid-themed series that will cover comics, monsters, sea serpents and neo-dinosaurs – includes revised articles

and essays Bissette wrote for his blog *Myrant* and for the excellent POD publications *Monster!* and *Weng's Chop*. He covers some of the usual suspects (the Yeti, Sasquatch, the Jersey Devil), but his unpacking of lesser-known cryptids proves most absorbing. As he did in *Teen Angels and New Mutants* (2011), a study of *Swamp Thing* collaborator Rick Veitch's seminal 1990s *Brat Pack*, Bissette provides much-needed analysis of some overlooked films.

Included here are an eclectic group of creatures, from the space alien/Yeti from the bizarre Swedish *Rymdinvasjon I Lappland* (1959; released in the US in 1962 as *Invasion of the Animal People*), to a rogue's gallery of

Lovecraftian creatures, including the ‘Demogorgon’ featured in the first season of Netflix's *Stranger Things* (2016). Also featured are human-monster hybrids, with lengthy examinations of two endearing regional efforts: the Z-grade *Zaat* (1972) and the streamed then direct-to-video *The Glasshead* (1998). Bissette also looks at more recent human-monster hybrids, from relatively bigger-budgeted releases, including Kevin Smith's disturbing *Tusk* (1998), to the box office bomb *Creature* (2011), which he considers a modern classic.

While not every topic covered is strictly cryptid cinema-related, Bissette's encyclopedic knowledge is impressive and his enthusiasm is infectious. Moreover, this inaugural self-published effort under his recently revived Spiderbaby Graftix imprint is illustrated with rare production stills, newspaper articles, adverts, and movie posters with dozens of fascinating sidebars and asides, making for a page-turner. There is unfortunately no index and the illustrations beg for colour reproduction; reportedly, a full-colour “Library Edition” is in the works. Despite these minor complaints, *Cryptid Cinema* remains a delightful and informative tour of the cryptid cinematic landscape. Highly recommended for forteans and movie fans alike.

Eric Hoffman

★★★★★





# A correspondence course

The prime minister and Society for Psychical Research member believed his dead lover and other early members were sending him messages

## Arthur Balfour's Ghosts

Trevor Hamilton

Imprint Academic 2017 336pp. £14.95 ISBN 9781783821884

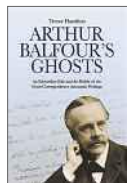
*Arthur Balfour's Ghosts* is the most significant book on the evidential aspects of mediumistic communications in several years. Trevor Hamilton examines the cross-correspondence mediumship generated by a small group of mediums in the early decades of the 20th century. These voluminous communications were considered of outstanding importance by an earlier generation of psychical researchers but have been neglected in the last 70 years. Sceptics have almost wholly ignored them, if they are aware of them at all.

In recommending this book to anyone interested in survival after death, I must emphasise it is not one for casual readers: it is aimed at academics and dedicated researchers. The reader coming fresh to the cross-correspondences should have some familiarity with many of the classics and foundation texts of Western literature, and the works of Romantic poets.

Despite its title, this book has little to do with ghosts as popularly conceived, but is an analysis of 3,000 plus texts and scripts generated over many years by widely separated mediums. They include Margaret Verrall, Mrs Coombe-Tenant, Alice Fleming, the sister of Rudyard Kipling, and the American medium Mrs Piper.

Rather than the simplistic messages of popular platform mediumship, material was produced by automatic writing in English, French, Latin and

classical Greek, and is packed with literary references and allusions. Individually, the messages often lacked the coherence of typical trance outpourings. However, when portions were combined, they appeared to reveal a complex set of coded meaningful communications suggestive of discarnate personalities contacting the living.



Prime minister Arthur Balfour's involvement came through his membership of the Society for Psychical Research and the belief

that some of the messages came from his deceased lover May Lyttleton, and from founding members of the SPR such as Frederic Myers and Edmund Gurney.

Hamilton's book is an informative guide to many aspects of the cross-correspondences opening up the scripts to what many consider the best evidence accumulated for proving the survival of consciousness after bodily death. Crucially, he went back to the source material and applied the computer analysis and comparison techniques to their contents that an earlier generation of scholars were unable to. Assessment is difficult since it is a primarily a qualitative exercise, involving examining their literary rather than their statistical aspects.

In considering the question of similarities between the widely separated scripts, he looks at alternatives such as coincidence, ordinary sensory transmission, psychological self-deception or the possibility of 'group-think' by an Edwardian elite.

These may have played a part, but cannot account for all the correspondences. The evidence is consistent with the hypothesis that "a scriptic

intelligence and memory" is monitoring the situation and could exist in the same narrative space as the automatists' and interpreters' work. Some of the material was also prophetic and suggestive of paranormal cognition of events which subsequently occurred.

As Hamilton admits there are drawbacks and limitations to both his examination and to any objective analysis; to fully examine and apprehend the cross-correspondences is beyond the time and resources that even the most industrious lone scholar can reasonably be expected to apply.

Hamilton recognises that a proper analysis would require interdisciplinary teams. Of course, any analysis whether from a scientific or humanities background would also be subject to cultural and personal assumptions; he recognises that the scripts have the potential to "irritate and unsettle those for whom objective analysis in terms of clear outcomes calculated against chance is crucial".

In providing such an outline of the contents of the scripts and their meanings, *Arthur Balfour's Ghosts* demonstrates that the importance of the cross-correspondences goes beyond psychical research and social history, but is also material that potentially has profound implications for theories in other fields including philosophy, consciousness studies, linguistics, cultural discourse and literary criticism.

As this book demonstrates, the cross-correspondences provide a case to answer on the issue of survival of consciousness after bodily death.

The practical question is whether scholars from other disciplines have the courage to take up the challenge.

Alan Murdie

★★★★★

## Butterfly and Me

A Schizophrenic Spirituality

Edward K Penny

Chipmunkpublishing 2015

Pb, 105pp, £10, ISBN 9781783821884

A sincere and unsettling memoir of a diagnosis of schizophrenia following a period of regular cannabis use. An introspective teenager given to philosophical musings begins university feeling himself an outsider.

Finding cannabis an immediate solution to his unhappiness, the heightened awareness and profound insights it induced were, he now believes, the initial stages of psychotic breakdown.

Later, in the grip of full-blown madness, believing himself an MI5 asset and Illuminati initiate, created in a test-tube from Ronald Reagan's DNA and destined to lead a revolutionary social movement, he is sectioned and placed on anti-psychotic medication.

The twist to this guilelessly self-critical 'cautionary tale', told without artifice or even art, is that Penny regards his previous state of mind as psychotic, but one which resulted in something extraordinary. He now enjoys regular communication with an entity he calls 'Butterfly.' Butterfly, he believes, is responsible for supervising our reality, and possesses similar attributes to God.

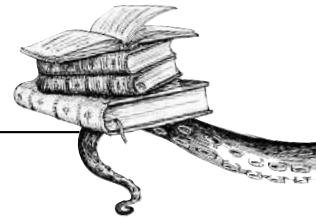
Butterfly communicates not by voice but by touch: pressure above the left eye signifies 'yes,' whilst above the right indicates 'no'; numerous other such tactile 'signifiers' constitute a sophisticated system. At other times, Butterfly will draw Penny's attention to a word on his computer screen, by a "quick streak of whiteness."

Here are echoes of Philip K Dick's visionary experiences, which may or may not have been drug-induced. Certainly, PKD and Penny appear keen to distinguish between delusions that were the product of psychosis, and other supernormal states of mind.

The reader is left to ponder whether Penny is – in his own words – "a rambling schizophrenic or in touch with a higher power."

Chris Josiffe

★★★★★



## ALSO RECEIVED

WE LEAF THROUGH A SMALL SELECTION OF THE DOZENS OF BOOKS THAT HAVE ARRIVED AT FORTÉAN TOWERS IN RECENT MONTHS...

### A Tale of Seven Scientists

Eric Scerri

Oxford University Press 2016

Hb, 228pp, illus, notes, ind, £22.99, ISBN 9780190232993

Eric Scerri's fresh attempt to answer the question "What is science?" is mercifully easy to read, given how daunting the field he covers. Expecting another tribute to a selection of famous exceptionally gifted individuals, one is surprised by the author's choice of what he calls 'little people' – seven virtually unknown chemists and physicists in the early 20th century, heroes nonetheless, whose work enabled the better known 'heroes' to determine the structure of the atom. These include Anton van den Broek (an amateur scientist who pioneered the idea of atomic numbers); Edmund Stoner (who while still a student provided the seed for Pauli's Exclusion Principle); and the virtually unknown John Nicholson (the first to propose the quantisation of angular momentum used by Niels Bohr).

Scerri explores why the British seem to prefer Popper over Thomas Kuhn. Where Popper reasons that progress derives from logic and rationality, Kuhn argues that trial and error and multiple discovery play a far more important role in moving science forward. And while he criticises Kuhn's famous notion of violent scientific revolutions, he agrees with him that science "is not drawn towards an external truth but is rather driven from within".

Scerri's conclusion is that an entity such as 'Science' needs constituent elements that behave intuitively, contributing 'slack' (as the Church of the SubGenius would call it) and the 'unexpected'.

Fort saw 'Science' as groping towards an "inclusive whole"; "The whole is God to the parts". This eerily recalls his casting of 'existence' as behaving like a singular organising organism. Using the language of the philosophy of science, Scerri seems to agree. Even the book jacket calls his approach "holistic and unified in

which science is seen as a living and evolving single organism".

Philosophical fortéans will find this intriguing.

### Ark of God

David Hatcher Childress

Adventures Unlimited Press 2015

Pb, illus, bib, notes, \$22.00, ISBN: 9780253024565

Although this title was first published in 2015, AUP is making it available again. It is, of course, a typical Childress book, with much retelling of other sources, scads of theorising, and very little in the way of scholarly depth. However, it is, *de facto*, one of the most useful surveys of a pretty obscure subject.

The true nature of the ancient Hebrew Ark and Tabernacle – in which Yahweh was said to reside during the wanderings of the Ark before the building of the first temple in Jerusalem – has been hotly debated over time with theories ranging from simply a sacred repository for pre-Jewish holy objects to the 'ancient astronaut' brigade claiming it was some kind of powerful energy generator.

Childress brings together these disparate sources, including the revival of interest in the Ark in modern movies, modern searches for historical remains of the Ark, and its place in the modern lore of supposed advanced technology in ancient times.

### Padre Pio

Colm Keane

Capel Island 2017

Pb, 213pp, £14.99, ISBN 9780955913396

It is regrettable that rationalists generally have a knee-jerk reaction to the mention of 'miracles', usually refusing to acknowledge even the slightest possibility that there might be something of value behind the stories.

Whatever they are, in their many forms, there is a surfeit of well-observed accounts by sober and intelligent and very well-qualified observers and witnesses – and this book is a case in point.

Colm Keane presents a new collection of first-hand encounters with the Italian Capuchin

monk Francesco Forgione (1887–1968), canonised as Saint Pio of Pietrelcina in June 2002, more famous for his manifestations of all five stigmata. Padre Pio's life, moods, opinions, piety and sense of humour are fleshed out in this highly readable portrait, as experienced by people who investigated, visited or stayed with him at the monastery of San Giovanni Rotondo at Foggia.

Of interest to us are the many new and enlightening details about his phenomena; e.g. Fr Alessio (Pio's assistant for six years) on seeing the stigmata: "They were horrible to look at. I had always wished to see them, but once I saw them, I prayed 'God, don't ever let me see them again.' His hands were like those of a leper, they were so corroded."

Other accounts testify to the saint's bilocations, telepathy, and healings among other 'gifts', and his love of the Irish.

### Uncany Clydeside

MJ Steel Collins

Beulaithrispublishing.co.uk 2017

Pb, 69pp, bib, £5.99, ISBN 9781520787428

Local historians and folklorists often record local material that the bigger and more academic surveys overlook. In this slim, privately published volume, Steel Collins, a Glasgow-based author, dives below the stormy political history of this region to excavate local stories of ghosts, poltergeists and witches, closing with an account of the shady early 19th century trade of supplying corpses to the training hospitals for dissection; all engagingly told.

### Immortality of the Gods

Nick Redfern

New Page Books 2017

Pb, 222pp, illus, bib, ind, \$16.99, ISBN 9781632650757

Nick Redfern add to his already extensive catalogue with this wide-ranging speculative thesis: what if there were a real connection between the alien visitations and many of the world's ancient legends and mysteries? He analyses the characteristics of the great men and mighty

heroes of the past and asks whether it might be feasible to reproduce their powerful abilities and apparent immortality with modern medicine and technology. Of course vast, (supposedly) secret conspiracies by military-intelligence agencies are brought into it, as Redfern claims that one of the reasons for invading Iraq in 2003 (the home of the Babylonian hero Gilgamesh and Sitchin's alien Anunnaki) was to recover an ancient formula for a form of white gold said to rejuvenate human cells. An amusing and perhaps provoking read.

### The Ascension Mysteries

David Wilcock

Souvenir Press 2017

Pb, 506pp, illus, refs, ind, £18.00, ISBN 9780285643628

Wilcock completes a 'best-selling' trilogy with the "shocking revelation" that mankind is "on the verge of a massive cosmic event that will transform matter, energy, consciousness and biological life as we know it".

To suit a Sitchin-style thesis featuring a battle between "positive and negative extra-terrestrials" that has been raging across our Universe for millennia, he seems to have cherry-picked his data; a method here described as "unifying ancient texts" from a wide range of sciences and religions. He hurtles, at speed, through myriad topics and disparate sources (planetary anomalies, mind-altering experiments, TV and comic SF, music, witchcraft, time-travel, wormholes, cults, ufos, pyramids, ghosts, conspiracies and abductions, and more) without really establishing the authenticity for any of his leaps of logic. This 'New Age manifesto' is evidence of a great deal of work and thought, but is it really (as claimed) "groundbreaking scientific information"?

Bear in mind that Wilcock also claims he was guided by the "higher intelligence behind the UFO phenomenon", and that the publisher describes this farrago rather blandly as a "gripping personal journey".

Guaranteed to drive a sceptic apoplectic.



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## All hail the King

Marvel's latest blockbuster is an imaginative overturning of received Hollywood wisdom and a multi-layered, Afrofuturistic celebration of the world's first Black superhero



### Black Panther

Dir Ryan Coogler, US 2017  
On UK release

It's not often that a movie feels like a cultural event, but for all the media hype on the one hand and the inevitable nay-sayers on the other, the palpable sense of excitement around Marvel's *Black Panther* is real enough. Certainly, there have been other black screen superheroes – from the pre-MCU *Blade* films starring Wesley Snipes to Will Smith's *Hancock* – but with the genre's subsequent ascent to box office dominance, the stakes, in terms of representation as well as cash, are now immeasurably higher; and this is why people are attaching so much importance to what is, to the literal-minded – whether cultural snobs, anti-capitalist hand-wringers, alt-right idiots, DC fanboys or boneheaded racists – just another big-budget

### *T'Challa must balance the conflicting pulls of isolationism and intervention*

crowd-pleaser from the Marvel superhero sausage-factory.

But *Black Panther* was always about making a point as well as making a splash: when Civil Rights conscious Stan Lee and Jack Kirby introduced the world's first black superhero in 1966, in issue 52 of *The Fantastic Four*, they knew exactly what they were doing: even the reliably cynical Ben Grimm was impressed, at least by the African leader's interior decorating skills ("Wow! Wotta pad!").

T'Challa was no spear-wielding

savage, noble or otherwise, from the fevered imagination of a previous age of pulp fiction, but the canny ruler of a technologically advanced African nation that had managed to stay off the radar of the colonialist West and develop in glorious isolation. He had the same kind of scientific smarts as Reed Richards or Tony Stark, but was also better looking than Sidney Poitier and proudly African to boot. Ever since he first headlined his own comics in the 1970s, *Black Panther* has been a political title, whether we're talking Don McGregor putting him up against the Klan or dropping him into Apartheid-era South Africa, Christopher Priest's frequently hilarious deconstruction of 'African' tropes or Ta-Nehisi Coates's explorations of governance and monarchy in the title's latest incarnation.

*Black Panther*'s first solo

film outing translates many of these elements – the sense of empowerment and wonder, the Afrofuturistic themes – into cinematic terms with near-complete success. While it was fun to witness the character's introduction in 2016's *Captain America: Civil War*, the real excitement here is seeing where he came from – the fictional kingdom of Wakanda, which offers up a heady mix of tradition and futuristic tech, cutting edge science and sometimes problematic tribalism. It's the visual equivalent of a Sun Ra album or a P-Funk stage show – EMP-driven monorails, saucer-like flying craft, cosmic mysticism and a riot of Afrocentric decoration. Wakanda is also, though, an hereditary monarchy (there are some surprising similarities to Netflix hit *The Crown* here) whose newly-anointed King has to balance the conflicting pulls of isolationism and intervention in the wider world.

This becomes more than just a question of geopolitical theory with the arrival of Erik Killmonger, an embittered yet tragic figure whose Wakandan heritage was stolen from him when he was abandoned as a child to grow up on the mean streets of America. Killmonger is one of Marvel's most complex and memorable bad guys – one who has a real and important point to make about the relationship between nationhood and the Black diaspora – and Michael B Jordan's performance is a powerful and heartfelt one. It's a standout, but just one among many. Chadwick Boseman's T'Challa is frankly irresistible, just as he should be – regal, soft-spoken and cool as a cucumber, with a sly sense of humour lurking under all the gravitas.



## THE REVEREND'S REVIEW

FT's resident man of the cloth REVEREND PETER LAWS dons his dog collar and faces the flicks that Church forgot! ([www.theflicksthatchurchforgot.com](http://www.theflicksthatchurchforgot.com))

### Flowers in the Attic

Dir Jeffrey Bloom, US 1987  
Arrow Video, £14.99 (Blu-ray)

So you think your family is difficult? They'll look like saints after you watch this adaption of VC Andrews's smash-hit novel, which pushes the dysfunctional dial up to 11. It starts with a creepily jolly brood who seem obsessed with their 'Father'. But when they leap out to greet him at his surprise birthday party, they find two cops at the door instead. Surprise! Dad's dead! Party hats are put aside, and mum panics that they'll be destitute without her late husband's income; especially since she's already been disinherited by her own uber-rich relatives. Getting a job doesn't seem to be an option, so instead she carts all four kids to the gothic mansion of her youth where 'mother' starts a lengthy plan to win back her father's love and be written back into the will. The catch? The kids have to stay locked in a secret, upstairs room. But at least they have access to a big, cobwebby attic to play in.

The camerawork of *Flowers in The Attic* might have that 80s-soft-focus look, but the themes of this story are as hard as nails – from parental neglect, violence and sexual abuse to murder, extortion and incest. That last one, incest, is all over this film. Fathers gaze at daughters a little too long, brothers and sisters wash each other in the bath, and in one skin-tightening scene the old bed-bound dad stares excitedly at his daughter as she drops her dress ready for the whip. Yeah, this film is messed up. It's like Norman



*A kid with a blond afro and dressed in dungarees bites his granny's ankle*

Warren directed an episode of *Dynasty*. But that combo of perverse melodrama and the gothic setting turn it into a pseudo-horror film that delights and disturbs in equal measure.

It's also unintentionally funny too. Take one totally gonzo moment where a kid with a blond afro and dressed in dungarees bites his granny's ankle. Furious, she slaps him out cold on the carpet while threatening to whip the children till

"the blood runs from their backs". It's both shocking and snigger-inducing at the same time. I'm not saying that the kid deserved the slap, by the way. But these children dress like they're permanently on a picnic! In the end though, if you can stomach the themes and the 1980s style, then *Flowers in the Attic* is really worth checking out, not least because it takes the phrase 'respect your elders' to extreme and perverse new heights.

Arrow have included a lot of extras here, including the rarely scene original ending, culled from an old Betamax tape, that was shown to focus groups. It's a fun conclusion, but the one the film actually opted for is the perfect climax to a piece like this – grotesque, creepy, symbolic and bizarrely pretty.

VC Andrews's Gothic family sagas were a huge hit with female audiences. I'd hate to label this a 'feminine' horror movie – not least because I know that women like high-octane chainsaw movies as much as the next person; yet *Flowers in the Attic* does feel like a little girl playing dark games in her doll's house – games that hinge not on the terror of the monsters out there, but the horror of relationships much closer to home. It's all the more intriguing and unsettling because of that: an intense shot of Gothic melodrama that gets straight into your bloodstream.



It's the film's trio of warrior women – Lupita Nyong'o's Nakia, Danai Gurira's Okoye and Letitia Wright's Shuri – who will steal the show for many, though, with their wit, wisdom and ability to kick serious butt. In fact, the whole film is impeccably cast, down to minor roles and the two Caucasians who get a look-in – Martin Goodman as CIA agent Ross and Andy Serkis as maniacal baddie Klaue; or, as some Internet wag brilliantly dubbed them, the film's "Tolkien whites".

Visually, too, *Black Panther* departs from the sometimes bland Marvel template: Wakanda is a world drenched in colour, full of both stunning natural beauty and awesome technological wonders, all brought to life by Oscar-nominated Rachel Morrison's luscious cinematography.

Director and co-writer Ryan Coogler (*Fruitvale Station*, *Creed*) deserves major props for marshalling the many elements at play here into a coherent and wildly entertaining whole: there are Bond-like sequences of espionage and action, nods to *The Lion King*, deft re-imaginings of classic comic book characters (a slyly funny take on M'Baku, for example) and epic battles involving armoured rhinos; and it all works, bar a lacklustre final act fight that lacks substance (and decent CGI) after the more meaningful ritual combat we've witnessed earlier in the film.

As we go to press, Panther-mania is in full swing. Black filmgoers – and not all of them comic readers I'd guess – are attending screenings in all their Afrocentric finery (as at the party-atmosphere premiere this reviewer attended) and sharing their pride and pleasure on social media. In an age prone to hyperbole, one can't help but feel slightly sceptical about some of the claims being made for the film and wonder whether *Black Panther* can really be expected to carry the weight being placed on its cinematic shoulders; whether or not the film turns out to be a watershed moment in Black cinematic representation, it will stand as a dazzling, joyous achievement that goes where few mainstream movies have gone before.

David Sutton





## Mom and Dad

Dir Brian Taylor, US 2017  
On UK release from 9 March

Even horror movies tend to respect certain taboos: killing children and animals is generally considered a faux pas, especially since it may alienate audiences. Hardcore horror fans find this rather tedious, as it tends to lower the sense of suspense and danger associated with any horror film that features young children (if not furry animals) among its protagonists. Even with mainstream audiences now looking for more original approaches to horror than the usual stalk 'n' slash fare, a film like *Mom and Dad* will likely still provoke a strong response, as literally no child is safe in this dark horror comedy.

With its tongue planted firmly in its cheek, the film sees parents across the globe suddenly snap and start killing their children in a variety of both amusingly over-the-top and genuinely disturbing ways. Generating both plenty of laughs and providing some mildly stomach-churning moments thanks to nothing being sacred here, the entertainment value of the film is obvious. Maintaining a good balance between fun and horror, the film has plenty of memorable set pieces, which ensures that things such as maternity wards and wire coathangers will never be the same – albeit the appearance of the two are thankfully unrelated in the context of this film.

For fans of Nicolas Cage's infamously spirited overacting, *Mom and Dad* will be a welcome treat, as the actor is most definitely in on the joke about the cult status of his more eccentric performances. Going 'full Cage', so to speak, the actor does not hold back as an absolutely unhinged father as he tries to kill his kids. Selma Blair serves as a more grounded contrast to Cage, all the while still having plenty of fun with just how crazy the role of a murderous mother allows her to get. Do not look to this film for engaging character portraits or development, though; it's all about the concept and how far it can be taken.

Where the film stumbles a

bit is in its attempt to add a degree of social comment. While the satirical undertones are evident throughout, the killing sprees make no greater point than to ensure a somewhat unconventional narrative.

Likewise, the musical choices are also applied with a certain degree of wit; however, the comic relief here is also only skin-deep, the lightness of the song choices clashing at times with the score, which can become overly intrusive and jarring.

*Mom and Dad* is, then, far from being a genre masterpiece that breaks new ground, but rather a darkly humorous string of entertaining (un)pleasantries that will thrill horror fans and sufficiently horrify the casual viewer.

Leyla Mikelssen



## Bombshell: The Hedy Lamarr Story

Dir Alexandra Dean, US 2017  
On UK release from 9 March

Anyone who knows their Hollywood history will not only recognise the name Hedy Lamarr, but also be able to put a gorgeous face to it. However, as many a woman with equal parts beauty and intelligence can confirm, the former tends to be remarked upon and celebrated a lot more than the latter; and in Lamarr's case, she would come to consider her beauty a curse. Just as fans of Hollywood glamour will cherish Lamarr the movie star, anyone with a decent knowledge of science and technology can attest to Lamarr's scientific accomplishments being just as, if not more, remarkable, as she played an integral part in developing the technology that people currently rely on for their Wi-Fi, Bluetooth and GPS needs.

In this documentary, the life, career and inventive genius of this remarkable woman are explored in detail. In an era of social change when women are increasingly gaining voices to tell their stories, Lamarr's is one that certainly deserves to be told, as it's a thrilling, witty and tragic tale of a woman for whom recognition is long overdue.

Leyla Mikelssen



## SHORTS

### VIKING SIEGE

Altitude, £7.99 (DVD)

At the heart of this film is an enticing concept: female warriors bent on vengeance must team up with a band of savage Vikings to defeat a horde of tree demons besieging the monastery where they are holed up. What self-respecting horror fan couldn't get on board with a film like that? And what has ended up on the screen is pretty faithful to the concept: everything the film promises, it delivers. There is wall-to-wall action, copious blood-letting and bone-crunching violence. Unfortunately, there are significant problems with virtually every other aspect of the production. Chief among these is the script: I'm pretty sure the English vernacular of the early Middle Ages did not include such *bon mots* as "spazz out" or "for fuck's sake". I understand that the film is not striving for historical accuracy but this sort of anachronistic dialogue renders the whole thing risible, if it wasn't already. On top of that, the English-speaking characters sport a wide range of regional accents, the majority of them sounding like Cockney wideboys: the sort of thing that caused Guy Ritchie's recent film about King Arthur to be met with hoots of derision. The acting veers from decent to inept and the makeup effects are similarly variable: the head tree demon is a genuinely fearsome beastie, but his minions look like extras with sacks over their heads. I don't like ragging on low-budget films, especially if there are at least one or two good elements in them, but a combination of poor handling and budgetary limitations have scuppered this one. **Daniel King** ★★☆☆☆

### CARRIE

Arrow Video, £19.99 (Blu-ray), £12.99 (DVD)

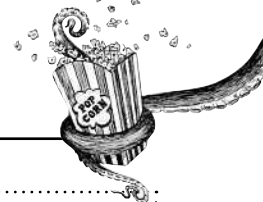
Brian De Palma kicked off the 'Based on a novel by Stephen King' movie juggernaut with a mesmerising adaptation of King's debut novel, *Carrie*. It's a beautifully simple plot: girl is bullied, girl has telekinesis, girl gets revenge. Yet this straightforward structure become a chilling baseplate to support an exploration of almost all the anxieties of teenage life – from fitting in, puberty and communal showers to crazy adults, prom night and the fundamental terror of everybody laughing at you. It's also got an absolutely spine-chilling final shot (not the famous jump scare – I mean the *final* final shot) where the frantic music and panicked acting cuts to black and the credits roll. My heart was beating at fever pitch. Packing this new release with extras, Arrow have given *Carrie* the respect she deserves. Which is just as well, considering. **PL** ★★★★★

### ELECTRIC DREAMS

Second Sight Video, £19.99 (Blu-ray), £12.99 (DVD)

In the Fifties and Sixties, the pathway into film directing was television; in the 1970s it was commercials and by the 1980s music videos, for this was the age of MTV. One of the most successful directors of these little marvels was Steve Barron, the man behind A-ha's 'Take On Me' and 'Money for Nothing' by Dire Straits, among others. The inevitable move into theatrical features followed swiftly and Barron's first effort was this 1984 rom-com. Lenny Von Dohlen stars as a nerdy architect who buys an elaborate home computer system to organise his muddled life. Somehow, the PC develops a life of its own and starts to take over Miles's, to the extent that it muscles in on his burgeoning romance with cellist Madeline (Virginia Madsen) who lives upstairs. As you might expect from a director of pop videos, it's all about the surface visuals; the rest is flimsy, shallow and slight. The most interesting aspect is the film's emphasis on fear of technology and the way it has begun to control human life. Unfortunately, it's an idea that is never really developed after the first 10 minutes, leaving us with a further 80 minutes of vapid light entertainment. By far the best thing here is the sublime theme song by Giorgio Moroder and Phil Oakey. **Martin Parsons** ★★★★★





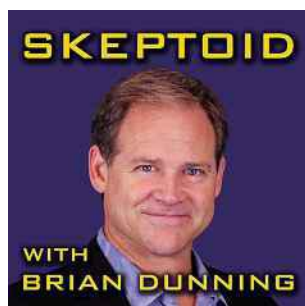
## SOUNDS PECULIAR BRIAN J ROBB PRESENTS THE FORTÉAN TIMES PODCAST COLUMN

**A**s a medium, podcasts have been enjoying something of a boom over the past few years. The democratisation of quality media production through high-specification computer equipment has allowed a plethora of previously marginalised voices their own access to what were once quaintly called 'the airwaves'.

In the past, broadcasting (reaching a wide audience from a single source) was heavily regulated and controlled, mainly through frequency scarcity: only those authorised or licensed to have access to the airwaves were allowed to broadcast. In UK terms that, initially, meant the BBC, with commercial stations coming along in the 1960s.

In terms of radio, there have been amateurs since the invention of the medium, reaching a crescendo with the offshore 'pirate' pop stations of the 1960s that ultimately led to the BBC launching Radio 1. For the longest time, Radio 4 (or NPR in the US) has been the default home of quality 'spoken word' content, whether that was drama, current affairs, or documentary radio.

Now, anyone with a microphone and an iPad, laptop, or computer and the right software can produce a decent podcast and launch their work onto a waiting world. Not all of them are good, while many are far better than you might expect, sometimes surpassing the productions of 'legitimate' broadcasters like the BBC or NPR. When it comes to fortean topics, there are a host of podcasts out there, ranging from the polished and compelling to the amateurish and downright weird. SOUNDS PECULIAR is your insider guide to the best of the current podcasts dealing with fortean topics: all you have to do is sit back and listen...



**Podcast:** Skeptoid  
**https://skeptoid.com/**  
**Host:** Brian Dunning  
**Episode Count:** 600+  
**Format:** Single Voice Reading  
**Established:** 2006  
**Frequency:** Weekly  
**Topics:** Just about everything

**W**ith over 600 weekly episodes running between 10 and 15 minutes each across more than 10 years, the Skeptoid podcast presented by Brian Dunning has at one time or another covered just about every fortean subject under the Sun (and the Moon). Only the most recent 50 episodes are available to listen to without paying for a premium feed, so if you want to delve into the deep history of the show, you'll need to cough up.

However, within the 50 free episodes currently available there is a wide range of interesting topics. Skeptoid started out as a fairly straight

science show considering topics such as sustainability, why 'woo woo' like magnets and wheatgrass juice have no measurable benefits whatsoever, or the basis of scientific testing. It wasn't long though before subjects such as Bigfoot, aliens, and the Philadelphia Experiment were subjected to Dunning's style of debunking.

Episodes in the 550-to-600 number range (from the very end of 2016 through to Halloween 2017) cover a diverse range of subjects, such as the myths surrounding the death of Hong Kong action movie star Bruce Lee, the 'ghost' fighter plane of Pearl Harbor, and the 1944 tale of 'the Mad Gasser of Mattoon'. Old fortean favourites include the DB Cooper mystery, false memory (#560: Remembering the Mandela Effect), lost children raised by animals (#567: Feral Children), and the hoary old stories of those forgotten Japanese soldiers who failed to realise the war was over (#585: Relic Japanese Soldiers).

There are some rather useful contemporary topics on offer too, focusing on Internet security or high-tech crime (#553: How Your Password Got Stolen; #554: How Your Credit Card Got Stolen). Other science subjects (often tying

in to recent events) include global warming (#549: The Simple Proof of Man-Made Global Warming), new-found sources of power (#555: Thorium Reactors: Fact and Fiction), the complications of 'phantom' pregnancy (#572: True or False Pregnancy), eclipses (#584: Eclipse Myths and Science), and controversy over pollution (#586: Volkswagen Dieselgate Re-examined).

Quirkier topics include whether Beethoven died of lead poisoning (#561: Beethoven's Hair), the tendency of scientists to experiment on themselves (#593: I Still Can't Believe They Did That: More Human Guinea Pigs), and the origins of the urban legend that the Beatles' Paul McCartney was replaced by a double (#594: Paul is Dead). Every so often, Dunning includes an update episode that adds some new information or insights to previous stories, often correcting errors or responding to listener feedback.

As always, UFOs are a popular subject, with Dunning tackling such cases as Canada's best-known flying saucer encounter (#565: The Shag Harbour UFO) and the famous 1974 UFO sighting by a New Mexico police officer (#582: Lonnie Zamora and

the Socorro UFO). Dunning even examines the question of whether strange things seen in the sky are likely to be an alien visitation or not – from a sceptical scientific point of view of course (#576: Lights in the Sky).

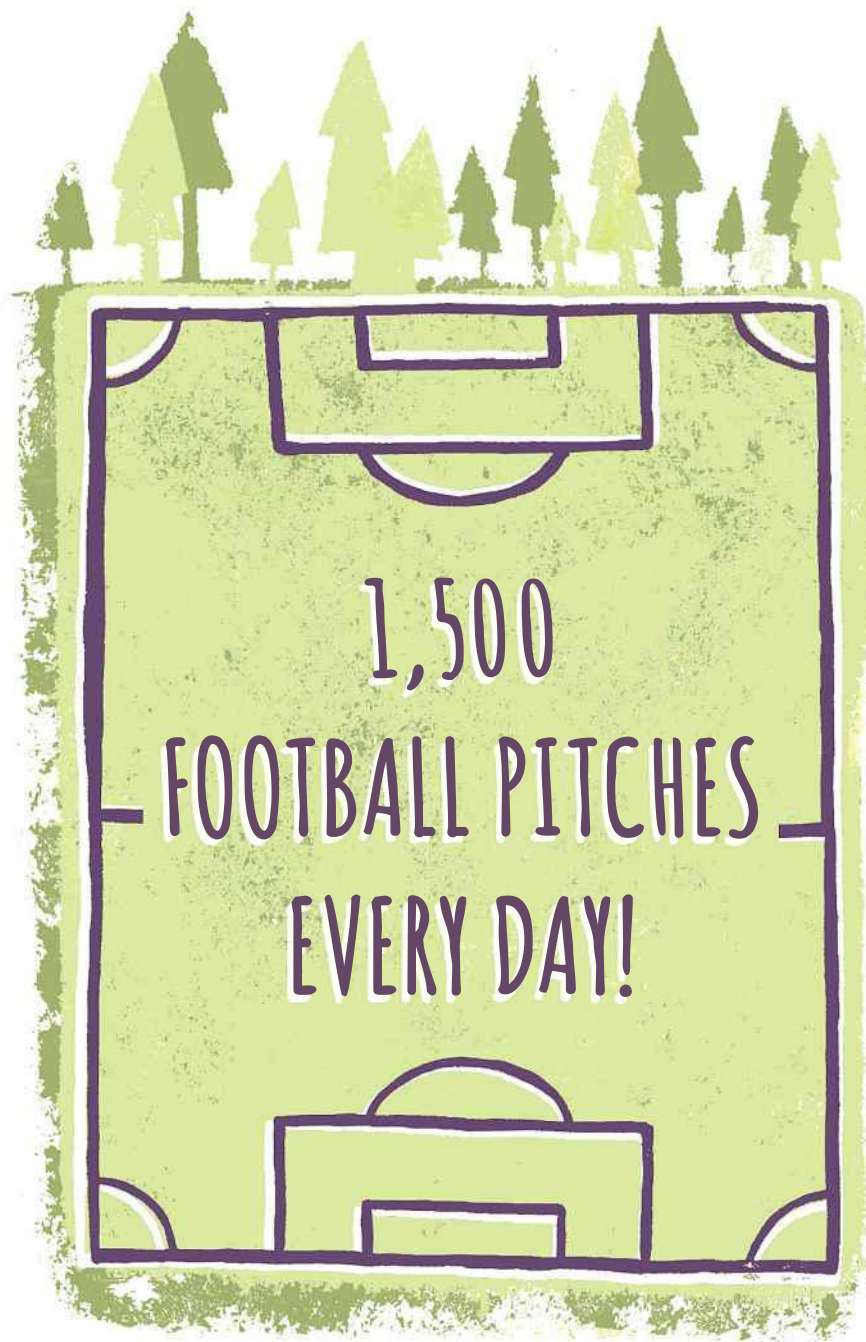
One episode takes a deep dive into the fairly recent controversy over the supposed photograph of lost pilot Amelia Earhart (#580: Amelia Earhart Redux: Competing Networks, Competing Crazyness). In this slightly longer than usual instalment, Dunning tackles the media coverage of the 1937 disappearance of the pioneering aviatrix. Outlining Earhart's character and achievements, he looks at the unanswered questions surrounding her vanishing act and examines how folklore and exploitation move in to fill the vacuum. In the process, known history is ignored or lost in favour of false histories that suit a TV programme's promotional needs rather than the search for knowledge or truthful answers. It's a good example of the mix of history, science, speculation and debunking that the Skeptoid podcast at its best delivers in neat, bite-sized chunks of satisfying listening.

**Strengths:** The 'just the facts, ma'am' approach is welcome...

**Weaknesses:** ...however, Dunning's delivery can sometimes be a bit on the dry side.

**Recommended Episodes:** #550: The Mad Gasser of Mattoon; #551: Space Missions You Should Know; #570: More Space Missions You Should Know; #573: There is No Finland: Birth of a Conspiracy Theory; #576: Lights in the Sky; #595: Chasing Malaysian Airlines Flight MH370.

**Verdict:** Short (most episodes are under 15 minutes) and to the point, the strength of Skeptoid is the sharp focus on facts and the debunking attitude.



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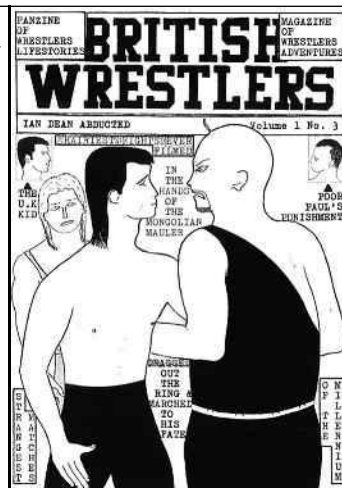
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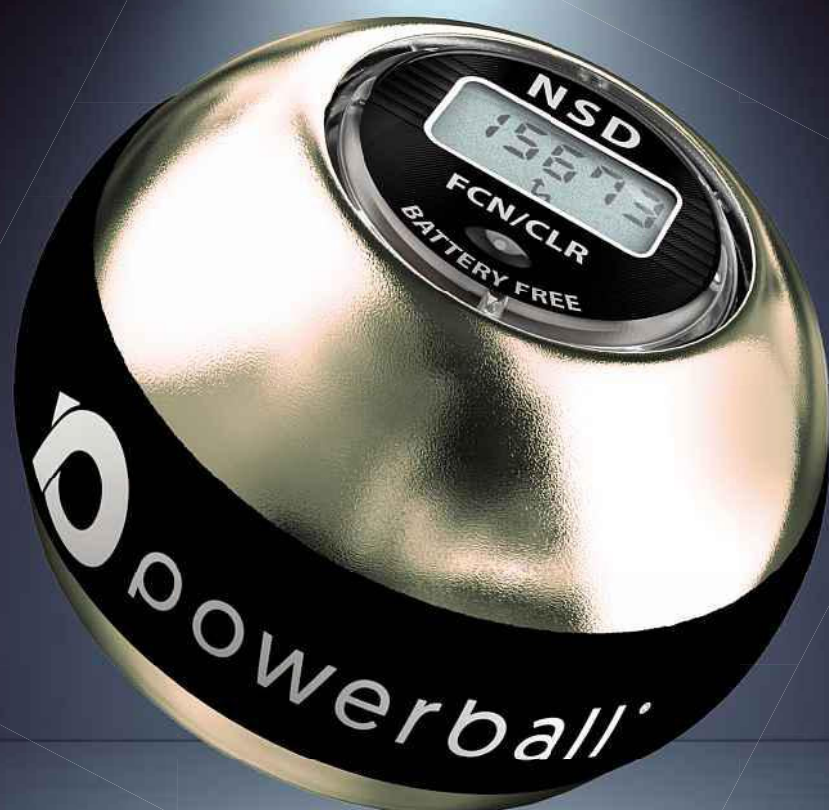
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## First memories

I can't compete with Rebecca Sharrock in an Ashes series of "Highly Superior Autobiographical Memory" [FT362:14], but I share her scepticism that events before we are five are irrecoverable. I was born in Cheltenham in June 1965. I recall my first non-liquid meal (lamb dinner, from a glass jar), and, more traumatically, confusing custard and mustard. On the day we moved to Swansea in 1968 I was amazed at the height of the buildings there, and that winter I was transfixed by the snowy Brecon Beacons. Are these false memories? I can't prove they are not, but I doubt they are. A couple of other details: I was precocious (reading at three) but not a prodigy, and I suffer from OCD (compare the brain scan of Jill Price).

● Simon Young's fascinating article about fairy sightings [FT362:30-37] made me think of one possible explanation. What is seen are small, often flying humanoids. In the womb, at some stage or other, we are their size, and floating in amniotic fluid is not unlike flying. Could these experiences be a memory of ourselves *in utero* projected outwards, with affinities to autoscapy? I was also interested in the "Oz Factor" and "highway hypnosis" elements. Does being enclosed in a car unconsciously remind people of being cocooned as a foetus, with few external stimuli?

**Richard George**

*St Albans, Hertfordshire*

## Slandering lizards

A sideline states that monitor lizards are venomous [FT361:9]. In fact, only the gila monster and bearded lizard are venomous. These monitors often have bacteria in their mouths, which infect wounds.

**Kevan Hubbard**

*Oxford*

## Anti-science weirdness

A claim has got me even more baffled than when it first came out many years ago, because

## SIMULACRA CORNER



### Fence faces

Clockwise from top left: Julian Butler noticed this "raving creosote green man" trapped in a fence in Williamstown, Melbourne. The owl-like face on a barn door in Ashland, Oregon, photographed by Vivian Ainsworth. This "happy chappie" was noticed by Gary Tavender on his garden fence in Howden, East Yorkshire. *We are always glad to receive pictures of spontaneous forms and figures, or any curious images. Send them (with your postal address) to Fortean Times, PO Box 2409, London NW5 4NP or to [sieveking@forteantimes.com](mailto:sieveking@forteantimes.com).*

one would not have expected it to survive this long. First put forward by Nobel prize-winning virologist Dr Peter Deuschel, the claim is that the HIV virus does not cause AIDS. This may have arisen before the development of the latest drugs, without the sometimes horrible side effects of the first generation. But today the new drugs targeted to fight the virus have indeed saved many lives, including former NBA star Magic Johnson.

So how can they work if the virus is not causing the disease? This seemingly fantastic claim was recently repeated in *Nexus* magazine (vol. 24 #4, 7/8/17, p.17) in a section of an article, (pp.16-17) 'Is There Something Wrong With The Germ Theory?' subtitled 'The Virus Wars'. Here's an excerpt: "To say that AIDS is not caused by a virus but simply by (destructive) life-style choices was unacceptable. But it was okay to claim that a virus is the cause of AIDS, and to scare

everyone." What is scary to me is how this article reflects the anti-science attitude, held by many American politicians and their followers, that conceivably could bring about the end of the world, long before comets, asteroids, volcanoes, or the Sun itself get around to doing the job.

**Richard Porter**  
*Denver, Colorado*

## Two-spirit

Paul Ross refers to Sheldon Nunez-Velarde's identity of two-spirit as being gay [FT361:42]. While Nunez-Velarde may well identify as gay, two-spirit does not normally carry this meaning within Native American culture. It generally means that the person sees themselves as both male and female, irrespective of their biological sex, and also has specific cultural meaning and place for some Native American peoples. Much more information on two-spirit people and their sig-

nificance can be found at <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Two-spirit> along with a quick Google of the term.

**Dave Z'arski-Riley**  
*Manchester*

## Opossum in tree

For two weeks I tried to locate the source of a horrible rotting odour that had permeated the front of my house. When my neighbours began to notice buzzards in my front yard, that gave away the mystery. Pockets, my cat, was chasing an opossum on the roof and the opossum leapt off the roof into a holly tree and got its hind legs so tightly wedged in the fork of the branches it hung upside-down while the blood ran to its head and killed it. This reminded me of stories I had read where hunters found deer with their hoofs wedged in the fork of trees – most likely the work of Bigfoot.

**Greg May**  
*Orlando, Florida*



# LETTERS

## Eno sees UFO

Another anecdote for those with an interest in music-related fortetana. David Sheppard's 2008 biography of UK art-rock icon and uber-producer Brian Eno, *On Some Faraway Beach*, mentions Eno's youthful recollection of seeing a UFO in the early 1960s in the company of his half-sister: "It was actually a simple enough thing: we were in the garden, it was twilight, and we saw an object in the sky, which was not an aeroplane. It was a long – sounds strange to say – greenish-coloured object with strangely shaped windows. It didn't have round windows – they were actually shaped like television screens" (p. 23).

Eno's experience occurred in his hometown of Woodbridge in Suffolk, close to the USAF's then-Cold War base of the same name. Fortetans may therefore find Eno's sighting of interest as a historical precursor to the UK's best-known UFO incident, the Rendlesham Forest encounters of December 1980, which involved RAF Woodbridge personnel.

**Dean Ballinger**

Hamilton, New Zealand

## Flies and serpents

A Mythconceptions column in 2010 "explained" how the houseflies of today pose no risk to human life [FT261:25]. Enter the equal and opposite experts, who warn of dire consequences if flies land on your food:

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/>

science/2017/11/24/flies-carry-bacteria-first-thought-warn-scientists/

I am reminded of an occasion in my youth when a fly landed in my soup, and I nonchalantly fished it out and continued eating. Normally I would do no such thing, but this was on a farm where I was eating at a refectory table with a gaggle of American hippies. I couldn't let such a chance to gross them out pass me by... I don't remember any unpleasant consequences from this.

• Norwegians are brought up to believe that Midgardsormen, the terrible World-Girdling Serpent of Norse mythology, is a particular Scandinavian construct. I was actually afraid of it when I was little, but then I was afraid of so many things. Until I read SD Tucker's "Poked by a Pokémon!" [FT345:55], I was unaware that the Japanese have a similar world-spanning catfish, but the two must surely be related (as *Private Eye* would put it). Since this trope crops up in two such different and far-apart cultures, it is probably part of other mythologies around the world as well.

**Nils Erik Grande**

Oslo, Norway

## Jung and the fox

I recently watched a film called *A Dangerous Method* directed by David Cronenberg and found much in it to recommend. It details the complex relationship between Jung and Freud. I wondered what a rationalist like Cronenberg made of Jung's

prophetic dreaming (repeated visions of World War I, rivers of blood over Europe) and synchronistic experiences (Freud's bookshelf). In particular I enjoyed watching the scene in which Freud warns Jung about "the black tide of occultism".

I have an inkling that Fort and Jung would have found much common ground. Jung had a need to map the insightful fruits provided by the unconscious mind, whilst Fort trawled through damned data in search of... who knows what? Perhaps their interests converge in the collective unconscious, where the Loch Ness monster swims in the fathomless depths and silver discs skip across the upper reaches.

My own fortetean experience happened over a decade ago. My grandfather was in a nursing home and nearing the end of his life. As happens during times like these, sleep was difficult and I lay in dread of the phone call. Throughout the night I had to fight an overpowering urge to get up and look out of the bedroom window. Finally I went to the window and saw a fox in the front garden. Our gaze connected for a moment and the fox then slipped into the night; a day or so later my grandfather passed away. A pragmatic Scot, he wouldn't have put much stock in the experience; but at the time it felt meaningful to me and I have often wondered if the Universe was trying to tell me something. Something perhaps only fully understood in our collective unconscious.

**Colin Muir**

Falkirk, Scotland

## Cornish 'ghost ship'

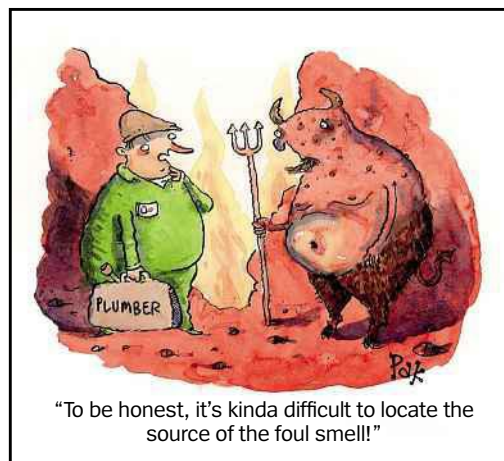
The Edwardian guide book *From St Ives to Land's End* by AG Folliott Stokes (Greening and Co, 1908) contains a strange account purportedly related first-hand to the author by an unnamed St Ives fisherman and "more or less in his own words". The fisherman had been catching conger eels one windless, moonless night (no dates or locations are given) and whilst taking a break to light his pipe suddenly saw "a large full-rigged ship" close on his starboard bow. The narrative continues in the Cornish dialect of the fisherman:

"[A]lthough there was not a breath o' wind, she was a-going through the water like a steamer and everything a-drawing fit to

bust. I couldn't a' moved hand nor foot, not if you'd a' given me the throne of England. I just sat and stared at her, sort of mazed like... she had a lot of portholes, like them 'ere old frigates used to have. These 'ere portholes was all abroad and the ship was lit up fore and aft like a blooming theatre... they was a-dancing like mad atween decks. I could see 'em whirling around. Women in these ere low dresses and a sight of flesh showing and men in pigtails, like Johnnie Chinaman, only shorter... Every now and then this 'ere gra-ate bell gave out a deep, low toll, as solemn as you mind to. I could hear it long after the sound of the fiddles and the swish of the water, and long after I had lost sight of the ship in the murk of the night. I must have sat there for some time sort of mazed; for when I got up to have a look round, the day had dawned and the tide had drifted me well-nigh of the pier head. So I turned to and rowed the boat in. But I can tell 'ee, it was more nor a day afore I felt myself again. And many night since have I dreamt of that 'ere ship, and heard the gra-ate bell a-tolling as solemn as you mind to."

The suggestion here is that this was no ordinary 'nuts and bolts' vessel. But was this an incredible first-hand account of a ghost ship collected locally by Folliott for inclusion in his guide? Alternatively, was it some kind of bizarre waking dream or vision experienced by a lone, tired fisherman at night? Or could it simply be a fanciful tale concocted by the author himself with no grounding in reality?

Regardless of whether or not this is a true account of an actual experience, it does contain a number of details which will be familiar to readers as existing in that murky hinterland where fairy lore and UFO encounters/alien abductions overlap. Firstly, the narrator suggests when first encountering the ship that he couldn't move "hand nor foot", almost as if in some kind of paralysis (a feature common in many abduction accounts). His description of portholes, all lit up with strange, exotic 'people' visible through them is a feature



"To be honest, it's kinda difficult to locate the source of the foul smell!"

PETER KING



## Equine disguise

I photographed this horse out on Dartmoor. When it lifted its head, it looked to me like some sort of strange monkey face with tiny ears.

**Lorna Stroup Nilsson**, *Princetown, Devon*

occurring in many 20th century UFO reports and even those of the earlier mystery airship waves of the late Victorian and early Edwardian era. Then we have some peculiarities common to fairy lore such as the playing of music and non-stop frenetic dancing. His description of seeing female flesh on display also tallies with the sexual fantasies present in many fairy and alien narratives. And when the fisherman describes the occupants as being “like Johnnie Chinaman, only shorter” is he suggesting they are diminutive people like those described in many classic fairy or alien encounters? The narrator then appears to be in a sort of daze immediately after the event (almost as if under a spell), subsequently finding himself in a different location and having experienced some missing time to boot. Finally, the next day he still didn’t feel completely right and continued to regularly experience the strange craft in his dreams.

My personal view is that this is a made-up account; given the date the book was published (1908) it may well be that the

author was aware of the recent mystery airship stories that had circulated and decided to contribute his own maritime version. But with nothing to validate the truth of the account and no dates or names to work on I don’t suppose we will ever know if the event described really happened.

**Alistair Moffatt**

*Totnes, Devon*

## Flying downstairs

When I read ‘Flying downstairs’ [FT355:76], I felt sure that I had read something similar before. I have now found the source. In the first part of his autobiography, *Over the Bridge*, first published in 1955, Richard Church describes how he levitated and flew down the stairs. The first time it happened, he was a child in a convalescent home in Broadstairs.

“I exerted that will, visualising my hands and feet pressing downwards upon the centre of the earth. It was no surprise to me that I left the ground, and glided about the room (which was empty) some twelve or eighteen inches above the parquet floor... I soared higher, half-way to the ceil-

ing... I floated down the staircase without touching either tread or baluster.”

He refers to this apparent ability to levitate a number of times in the book, and again in the sequel, *The Golden Sovereign*. He could still fly down the stairs when he was an adult, working as a civil servant in the Custom House before WWI. At one point he says that it must have been an illusion, but at another he mentions the fact that another person, the girl in Folkestone with whom he was in love, had observed that he could apparently grow taller at will, the explanation for this being that his feet were not actually touching the floor.

**Janet Doolaege**

*France*

## The strange 1970s

Like many FT readers of a certain age, I have been reading the stories about ‘The Haunted Generation’ and scary kids’ programming with some interest [FT354:30-37, 357:74-76, 359:72, 361:76.] I was a child of the 1960s near Coventry, and a teen in the 1970s in Manchester, so I feel well

qualified to chip in with a couple of observations.

Firstly, this was a time less than 30 years from the end of WWII. Britain still bore many of the physical scars of that conflict and Britons often bore the psychological scars. I used still to see bomb and bullet/shrapnel scars on many buildings in the centre of Coventry, and I played in an area known locally as ‘The Wreck’, which I was unaware at the time was in fact a series of massive clay pits and ponds created by the bombed out remains of some giant factory. Every adult I knew over the age of 30 was a war child, or like my father a former combatant, and carried with them to a greater or lesser extent the effects of that conflict. That included most of the teachers.

Secondly, it was also the time of Cold War. I recall having ‘nuclear’ bomb drills at infants’ school in the early 1960s, where we sat under our desks with our hands over our ears, eyes tightly closed and our mouths open. That sort of thing sticks in your mind. The Cold War fears started ratcheting up again in the 1970s, and were accompanied by a feeling that Britain was on the verge of social collapse as we hit the ‘Winter of Discontent’ in 1979, with power cuts, stories of the dead not being buried, and garbage mountains on the streets becoming the big background stories of many lives. So perhaps it’s no real surprise that many FT readers are recounting strange feelings of disquiet from that period.

By the way, I always recall the TV show *Noggin the Nog* (1959-1965 and 1979), especially the black and white episodes, as having something of a strange edge to them. Something about the voice-overs at the show’s introduction “Listen to me and I will tell you the story of Noggin the Nog, as it was told in the days of old”, or the other episode introduction “In the lands of the North, where the Black Rocks stand guard against the cold sea, in the dark night that is very long, the Men of the North lands sit by their great log fires and they tell a tale...” used to make



# LETTERS

me shiver. The soundtrack by Vernon Elliott was affecting as well. Great stuff!

**Andy Kelly**

*Blackpool, Lancashire*

I'd like to belatedly add my appreciation of Bob Fischer's article on the haunted generation, a generation with which I enthusiastically identify. I grew up in Townsville, Australia, in the 1970s, but I felt the same sense of melancholy and unease at times, especially as I reached my mid-teens. *Children of the Stones and Sky* in particular left a strong impression on me. I was always a *Doctor Who* fan, but the other show I vividly recall was *The Tomorrow People*. The writing and some of the acting could be pretty dubious (a later story featured a sock puppet called Thing), but at its best it visited some pretty vivid and trippy fortean themes like psychic invasion and magic – stories like *The Blue and the Green* have a very Wyndhamesque feel, and *The Doomsday Men* is still relevant today.

I devoured books as avidly as I watched TV shows, and became familiar with fortean staples like the Bermuda Triangle and the Berkeley Square horror (which terrified me), through various Pan, Fontana and Sphere books. The first book about fortean topics I can recall reading was CB Colby's *Strangely Enough*, which set me on a course I have never really left. In the later 1970s I read books like Lee Harding's *Displaced Person*, Roger Eldridge's *Shadow of the Gloomworld* and William Corlett's *Gate of Eden* trilogy – books which were both intensely emotional, and dealt with loss and despair. In *Displaced Person*, the narrator slowly becomes ghostlike and forgotten as he fades into a grey realm where he encounters lost objects and people, as the greyness closes in. I was also attracted to school poetry anthologies that reflected this unease.

Then I discovered early 1980s rock – I was happy to see John Foxx name-checked, as Ultravox really grabbed me with *Vienna*, along with Visage's *Fade to Grey* and *Mind of a Toy*. It took a while to get hold of John Foxx era songs



## Press here

I came across this headstone amongst the graves in St Bridget's Church, West Kirby, when taking part in the St Olave's Viking Heritage Walk & Pilgrimage on 25 July 2017. You will see that it simply says "Press". No forenames, dates or anything else attributable to whoever is buried there. Is this a name or an instruction? What would happen if I went across and pressed it? Fortean can obviously come up with lots of ideas, probably mostly relating to George A Romero films. I rang the vicar at the church who confirmed that it is a grave and that it is assumed to relate to a family name. He didn't know who is buried there without delving deep into the church records.

**Rob Gandy Wirral, Merseyside**

but *My Sex, Just For a Moment* and his solo song *The Garden* to this day recall the melancholy that haunted my childhood, and his Belbury Circle material captures the same sense of hauntology and longing. I don't think I really felt it again till stumbling across *Fortean Times* in the early 1990s, coinciding with *The X-Files*, which had its own take on nostalgia and contemporary folklore.

**Matt Cardier**

*By email*

## Buckinger's Boot & Edinburgh ghosts

Classical Corner [FT362:15] showed that some disabled people, for example Matthew

Buckinger, overcame the ancient and regrettably still current prejudice against them, but missed an interesting point of linguistic history.

Grose (*Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* 1811) says Buckinger's Boot is a term for "The Monosyllable" i.e. "A woman's commodity". Buckinger's wife was referred to as his boot as he had only one place to wear a boot. This suggests the origin of the term "old boot" for a mature and tough woman, a usage I recall from the 1960s, though it seems to have gone out of fashion.

● Regarding Ghostwatch [FT362:20]: once public executions ceased and prisons became the main location for executions,

the ghosts of condemned prisoners began haunting the jails where they died, rather than the public execution site as was the case in earlier times. On one occasion at least, however, prisoners faked a haunting to distract from an escape attempt. (Owen Davies and Francesca Matteoni, *Executing Magic in the Modern Era: Criminal Bodies and the Gallows in Popular Medicine*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

● The Greyfriars Kirkyard haunting [also FT362:20] seems to have started in 1998, if the stories are accurate, after a homeless man fell into a hidden plague pit. This would make starting the ghost tour in the 1990s a rushed affair, especially as the council had to be involved and – according to [www.janandrewhenderson.com/about/](http://www.janandrewhenderson.com/about/) – the founder of the tour business only returned to Edinburgh in 1999. The Greyfriars haunting is consistent with a number of theories including a malevolent spirit released from the plague pit, a collective thought form generated once the pit had been discovered, or a long-lived form of mass hysteria. Rob Kirkup (*Ghosts of Edinburgh*, Amberley Publishing 2013) describes an investigation of the Greyfriars haunting with ambiguous results, though he may have primed his fellow investigators. Similar phenomena are reported in the Niddrie Street Vaults in Edinburgh and in Mary King's Close.

More research is needed regarding how to distinguish between phenomena generated by expectations and genuine phenomena, but it seems a little simplistic to imply these phenomena are the result of over-excitation or rampant entrepreneurialism turning a minor incident, possibly with a mundane explanation, into a business opportunity as in the Shepton Mallet case.

As to the reference to "Amateur Ghost Hunters": I am unaware of any professional ghost hunters.

**Alex Kashko**  
*Edinburgh*

# IT HAPPENED TO ME...

First-hand accounts from *FT* readers and browsers of [www.forteantimes.com](http://www.forteantimes.com)

## Opening window

From 2000 to 2012 I lived in an old terrace house in Sydney dating back to the 1880s. I never had the sense that there was an otherworldly presence – although the woman in the adjoining house claimed that the ghost of a boy had pushed her down the stairs. I had a wonderful converted attic with a large window built into the pitch roof. The window opened with a handle that you had to turn. I was in my thirties at the time and even though I had been a rugby league player and considered myself to be reasonably fit, it took quite an effort to open and close this window. You could see the window from the courtyard and there must have been 20 times or more when I would be in the courtyard and would look up and think, “Oh, I’ve left the attic window open. That’s strange, I’m sure I’d closed it.”

One overcast day shortly before I moved out, I was working in the attic when I noticed that it was starting to rain. I quickly closed the window, using two hands to wind it shut, and ran downstairs as I had washing on the line that was probably dry and I wanted to get it in. As I frantically pulled the clothes off the line, I looked up at the attic window and noticed that it was open again. I stood there in the rain, staring up at the open window and thought back to all the other times that I was sure I had closed it only to see that it was open again.

**John King**  
*Sydney, Australia*

## The Ginger Policeman

On an August day in 2002, I drove up to Doddington in the Cheviot Hills of Northumberland to visit the cup-and-ring-marked rocks on Dod Law (pictured above). The afternoon was beautiful, sunny and warm. The rocks are a mysterious place, and perhaps my experience



afterwards can be laid at the door of a touch of sunstroke or the influence of the strange location. I got back to my car, which I’d parked in a lay-by just outside Doddington village. I opened a bottle of juice and ate the last of my sandwiches. Everything was fine and I felt quite normal, happy with my afternoon’s adventure. I saw a movement in the road in front of me and glanced up to see a police car coming towards me. I don’t know what caused me to notice the last three letters of the registration plate – perhaps because they spelled a word, LET or ART or something – I can’t remember. Also, the car was being driven by a red-haired policeman. I noticed that because the sun brought out the colour. He drove past me.

I returned to my book and my picnic and thought nothing more of the incident... until half a minute later, when I noticed movement in the road ahead of me again. Once more I looked up. Another police car. Weirdly, the number plate – LET or ART or whatever it had been – was the same. And, as far as I could possibly tell in the five or so seconds I had to observe as the car went past, it was being driven by the same red-headed policeman.

I didn’t know how to interpret this. I didn’t know what possible significance the double event

could have, and for a few minutes I just carried on reading, packing up the remains of my lunch, getting ready to start the trip home. And then I began to feel... weird. As if a shadow had fallen on the sunny afternoon. The hairs on my nape stood up, and a sense of oppression took hold of me. Apprehension, almost. The best description of the feeling I can give is this: that I’d seen something I shouldn’t have, observed a “jump in the reel” of reality, as if a cosmic tape somewhere had hiccupped and hitched and begun to play again. Suddenly I wanted to get away from there. I had a horrible conviction that if I didn’t put distance between me and the place where I’d inadvertently witnessed this, something would happen to stop me.

I drove off as quickly as I could. I did check one thing on a map later, which was that there was no roundabout or circular connecting road which could have brought the police car round and past me twice in that short space of time. No – the road the cars had taken, and my route out, was a long straight stretch of the B6525. I don’t know what this means. All I can say is that I didn’t feel calm or safe again until I was well on my way home. I’ve spoken to a few friends about it, and they have no ideas either, except to agree that I had perhaps seen a

“reality glitch”, and incurred the wrath of whomever/whatever is in charge of these things!

**Harper Fox (Ms)**  
*By email*

## Dazed and confused

Last year I had a lost time incident. My first coherent memory of the day was being in hospital after having a CT scan. My wife had left to see a friend at 11am and I was going to do some work in the garden. She returned at 1.30pm to find me, to quote Led Zeppelin, “dazed and confused”. I told her I thought I’d blacked out and there was evidence that I had started to make a coffee but not finished the job. Physically I was functioning quite normally, but mental function was a different matter. She realised there was something seriously wrong when I saw clothes laid out in a bedroom and asked “Are we going on holiday?”

Questioning revealed that I had no memory of anything since about 2013. I immediately forgot the answer to any question I had asked and kept repeating the question like a broken record. In the ambulance I kept asking: “You’ll have to tell me why I’m here and I don’t mean that as a philosophical question” – which sounds rather fortean. When hospital staff attending to me went away and then returned to the cubicle I said things like “Haven’t we met somewhere before?” Assorted tests (blood, urine, X-ray, CT scan, etc) gave normal results. Then at about 5.30pm my memory began to return, but apart from what others have told me, what happened that morning remains a blank. The final diagnosis was something called TGA (Total Global Amnesia), which is apparently not that uncommon and, thankfully, has no specific future implications. However, I do wonder if other lost time incidents might have a similar cause.

**Ron Gardner**  
*Ludlow, Shropshire*



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# WHY FORTEAN?



**FORTEAN TIMES** is a monthly magazine of news, reviews and research on strange phenomena and experiences, curiosities, prodigies and portents. It was founded by Bob Rickard in 1973 to continue the work of Charles Fort (1874–1932).

Born of Dutch stock in Albany, New York, Fort spent many years researching scientific literature in the New York Public Library and the British Museum Library. He marshalled his evidence and set forth his philosophy in *The Book of the Damned* (1919), *New Lands* (1923), *Lo!* (1931), and *Wild Talents* (1932).

He was sceptical of scientific explanations, observing how scientists argued according to their own beliefs rather than the rules of evidence and that inconvenient data were ignored, suppressed, discredited or explained away. He criticised modern science for its reductionism, its attempts to define, divide and separate. Fort's dictum "One measures a circle beginning anywhere" expresses instead his philosophy of Continuity in which everything is in an

intermediate and transient state between extremes.

He had ideas of the Universe-as-organism and the transient nature of all apparent phenomena, coined the term 'teleportation', and was perhaps the first to speculate that mysterious lights seen in the sky might be craft from outer space. However, he cut at the very roots of credulity: "I conceive of nothing, in religion, science or philosophy, that is more than the proper thing to wear, for a while."

Fort was by no means the first person to collect anomalies and oddities – such collections have abounded from Greece to China since ancient times. **Fortean Times** keeps alive this ancient task of dispassionate weird-watching, exploring the wild frontiers between the known and the unknown.

Besides being a journal of record, **FT** is also a forum for the discussion of observations and ideas, however absurd or unpopular, and maintains a position of benevolent scepticism towards both the orthodox and unorthodox.

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CHUPACABRA

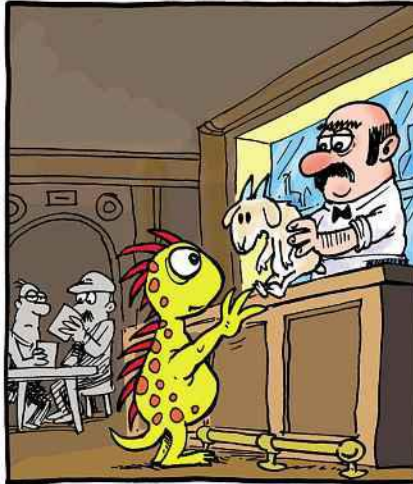
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BLEEDING WAFERS AND OTHER  
EUCCHARISTIC WONDERS



## THE GOAT-HEADED GOD

A LITTLE HISTORY OF  
BAPHOMET



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DOGGY DETECTIVE,  
DAVID ICKE ON TOUR,  
AND MUCH MORE...

# FORTEAN TIMES 365

ON SALE 29 MAR 2018

# STRANGE DEATHS

UNUSUAL WAYS OF SHUFFLING OFF THIS MORTAL COIL

Daniel Brandon, 31, died from asphyxiation on 25 August at his home in the Hampshire village of Church Crookham. He is thought to be the first person in Britain to be killed by a python. His mother Babs discovered him unconscious in his bedroom on the night of his death and later found a female 8ft (2.4m) African rock python named Tiny out of her vivarium and coiled under a cabinet near his body. She called paramedics, but her son could not be saved. Coroner Andrew Bradley recorded a verdict of misadventure, making it clear he did not believe Tiny had been aggressive towards her owner, but had probably been coiling around him in an affectionate way. He did not believe she had wrapped around Brandon for warmth – as is thought to have happened when a python killed two boys in Canada in 2013 [FT308:20]. As well as Tiny, Brandon's bedroom was home to another nine snakes and 12 tarantulas. He had kept snakes for 16 years and the python was "his baby". She used to be small enough to fit in his hand. *BBC News*, 24 Jan; *Guardian*, *D.Mail*, 25 Jan 2018.

Former zoo worker Arslan Valeev, 31, from St Petersburg let his Black Mamba snake bite him and then live-streamed his suicide. He begged fans of his animal YouTube channel to ask his ex-wife Katya Pyatyzhkin to visit him as his breathing quickened and his eyes rolled. A viewer called an ambulance and Valeev was taken to hospital, but the Russian blogger could not be saved. *Metro*, *D.Star*, 27 Sept 2017.

Yuthapong, 30, an engineer from Saraburi in Indonesia, was found dead under a slab of concrete next to a deserted beach restaurant. He was dressed in a purple shirt and no trousers, with a bed sheet nearby. Police suggested that he had gone to the beach and dozed off only to be hit by debris brought in by waves; but they admitted they were baffled by his missing trousers, which were nowhere to be found. There was no sign of a struggle or apparent injuries to the body. Locals said the area was haunted by a particularly nasty ghost that clearly enticed the man to his death. Yuthapong was from out of town and would have been unaware of the risk. *thaivisa.com*, 8 Dec 2017.

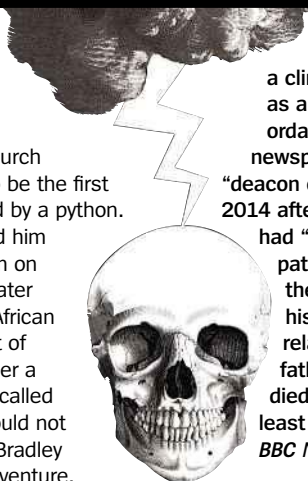
Ivo Poppe, 61 – suspected of killing at least 10 people by injecting air into their blood, causing a fatal embolism – has gone on trial in Belgium. The offences took place at

a clinic in Menen, where he worked as a nurse – and later, after being ordained, in a pastoral role. Belgian newspapers have dubbed him the "deacon of death". He was arrested in 2014 after telling his psychiatrist that he had "euthanised" dozens of elderly patients, but subsequently denied the charges against him. Among his alleged victims are several relatives: two great-uncles, his father-in-law, and his mother, who died in 2011. Prosecutors say at least 50 deaths are suspicious. *BBC News*, 22 Jan 2018.

Sergei Terekhov, 64, hunting with his brother in a remote part of the Saratov region on the banks of the Volga in southwestern Russia, was shot dead by one of his own dogs. He let his two Estonian hounds out of the boot of his Lada car. According to local news website Region 64, "the paw of one of the animals got on the trigger of the hunting rifle, the butt of which was on the ground, and the barrel was aimed at the man's stomach." His brother drove him to hospital, where he died of his injuries. *Independent (online)*, 23 Jan 2018. We have reported many cases of hunters shot by their faithful hounds – see FT3:3, 25:14, 52:22, 63:33-34, 289:8.

A Russian man died after he pulled the pin out of a hand grenade and posted photographs of himself holding it. Alexander 'Sasha' Chechik was killed instantly in the incident in the city of Labinsk in southwest Russia. He had sent a text to a friend, including a picture of the grenade in his hand with the pin pulled from the device lying nearby. *Independent*, 28 Nov 2017.

A Russian industrial climber was found dead, dangling from the roof of a snow-covered student dormitory. There are no suggestions 26-year-old daredevil Yevgeny Tikhonov took his own life. Icicles were hanging from his feet and his head was covered with snow. The macabre sight 40ft (12m) above the ground was spotted by a young girl in Anzhero-Sudzhensk, a town 65 miles (105km) north of the Siberian city of Kemerovo. His body appeared to have been dangling from the building for a long period, but local reports suggested he died only two hours before he was spotted. Temperatures had plunged to minus 27°C at night in the hours before the tragedy. Tikhonov was a well-known and experienced industrial climber, who had worked repairing many tall buildings. *D.Mail (online)*, 16 Jan 2018.



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